CORONET

PENELOPE FARMER

STANDING IN THE SHADOW

A wonderfully perceptive evocation of the bond between two women — a bond that neither sought and neither can resist

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About the Author

Penelope Farmer is the author of six novels for children and young adults (the best-known of which are CHARLOTTE SOMETIMES and A CASTLE OF BONE). She has two children, and lives in London. STANDING IN THE SHADOW is her first novel for adults.

Standing In The Shadow

Penelope Farmer

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For Joyce Weiner
with love and thanks

. . . but the puzzle and the meaning
of my sudden freedom—
her touch on me,

soothing and cool, as though I sank
into a pool and drank
there, thankful—

was it a dream of love or death?
The grave where I now slept,
or her soft breast?

RUTH FAINLIGHT

Part One

"Soon now I shall see Mummy again," said Ellie's mother, the week before she died, lying in her hospital bed. As she was fifty-three years old, motherless for fifty years, Ellie found it both embarrassing and extraordinary. But nothing seemed extraordinary for long these days—in a moment rather she pitied, loved, feared and wondered. Her thoughts on the matter were relatively simple. Though married a few months she seemed, she was, ridiculously young. Had her mother really kept such longing all this time? Did everyone go on wanting a mother so much? Then what did being grown-up mean? Wasn't she now, herself, grown-up?

Her feelings were not simple, and went on growing more complicated as the years went by.

"Soon, now, I shall see Mummy again."

She felt the awkwardness—how mawkish it was—yes, mawkish, that was the word, a decade or so later, telling Clara what her mother had said. Clara her lover. (She could hardly get her tongue round that, either. It was only the second or third time they had been to bed together; that Ellie had been to bed with a woman.)

"She looked so joyful," she added, remembering. "If you'd only seen how terrified she had been till then."

"Does anyone ever get over needing to be mothered?" asked Clara, tenderly, stroking Ellie's back.

"Surely you must. Mustn't you? But I don't see you as my mother figure, Clara."

"Don't you? What a shame. We'd be beautifully incestuous. Does your nose always go red when you make love, Ellie? It's charming."

Ellie grew bold. "I love your nose and your mouth and your eyes . . . I love . . ."

"How carnivorous you sound," said Clara, looking into her eyes.

"I *am* carnivorous. I want to eat you up," returned Ellie. And there they were again, tumbling over and over, biting, licking, stroking, seeking with tongues and fingers for the deepest crevices of each other's bodies; they yearned so much for what they did not, could not, identify, there was no stopping them. Ellie had never in her life felt such fury, let alone had it returned; her bed was upended and destroyed, the sheets so reeked of ,women she had to change them afterwards in case Peter, her husband, grew suspicious.

Clara was a big but shapely woman, with a face too heavy and features too pronounced to be beautiful. She had, however, striking and lively eyes and an eruption of curly red hair. She and Ellie were not near neighbours, living six miles or so apart in different suburbs, and they had met at a dinner party given by a business associate of Peter's, in the summer of 1973.

Ellie had not wanted to go to the dinner; she arrived at it jangled and gloomy. Peter having reached home an hour later than usual that evening, she had been playing the fool with her children, Lucy and Sam, and neglected to start getting ready as early as she should. Each having been forced to wait upon the other, they bickered in the car all the way, not that that was unusual; it was no reason why Ellie should have felt quite as edgy as she did. As soon as she set eyes on the gathering she felt disinclined to speak to anyone—certainly she'd no desire to speak to the man she sat next to at the dinner table. The fact that he was manifestly as uninterested in speaking to her, depressed her, perversely, still further. A small man with protuberant eyes and belly, slick hair and an expensive suit, he asked in a drawling voice a few perfunctory questions—wasn't it a marvellous evening, where was she going on holiday this summer, did she have any children—and in the face of her equally perfunctory, not to say mumbled answers, turned in obvious relief to the plain but more sophisticated woman in bright green who sat on his other side.

Ellie's left-hand neighbour was no more promising; the seventeen-year-old son of her hostess, dragooned into attending, his answers to her polite questions were as mumbled as

her own. Thereafter he sat glowering, his face hidden by a swathe of hair, and rolled bread in soggy pellets which he arranged around his plate. His only communication was wordless and with his mother, a plump, handsome woman in a green and blue Afghan dress who threw him meaning and angry looks that he alternately ignored and returned in a sly, elliptical manner. It seemed to Ellie, sitting amid the murmur and shriek of other voices, the most vivid communication in the room—the only vivid communication. They were like two dogged creatures locked in combat at the bottom of the sea—and she was the man in the bathyscaphe, observing this submarine life from behind reinforced glass. As she sucked oil and vinegar off endive leaves, she noted that the very flowérs in the centre of the table were like underwater plants; red and white peonies, their tight, fleshy globes looked as animal as sea-anemones. You felt if they sucked you in you would never escape; maybe you wouldn't *want* to escape. Ellie felt quite dizzy at the thought.

At this point she laid down her knife and fork and told herself, severely, to pull herself together. Surely she could not be drunk already? Her expensively clad neighbour she saw was listening benevolently to the theories expounded by the woman in green on the impending Watergate inquiry, one arm thrown so carelessly across the back of his chair she had to shift to avoid it. Meanwhile, the boy's mother, leaning over him, ostensibly to set more salad on the table, advanced their battle in furious mutters. Neither seemed likely to rescue her. In search of alternative diversion, Ellie looked across at Peter and took note for the first time of the woman he was talking to; why she had not before, she couldn't for the life of her imagine. For she was dazzled, immediately, almost before she saw by whom, by what; by the brown stones perhaps, set in silver, which moved at the ears and throat of this large elegant, red-headed woman in her rather severe plum-coloured dress, talking with such animation that both necklace and earrings shifted and glittered continually.

Ellie could not take her eyes off her; even Peter noticed at last, though he appeared engrossed. Naturally he mistook her interest for simple jealousy, frowning back at her, a look Clara must have caught, for she laughed, the sound rising above the other din, then, her eyes still on Ellie, bent her head to Peter;

presumably she was asking if this woman was his wife. Ellie leaned forward eagerly, trying to catch her voice, in vain, the table was too broad. At once Peter looked more annoyed than ever. He raised his eyebrows, mouthed something, gestured so energetically she at last caught his meaning and looked down to discover her necklace, a silver medallion on a chain, dipping into the plate of strawberry fool which had just been set before her. Disconcerted, she wiped it clean on her napkin, then having glanced back surreptitiously to find herself still watched by a smiling Clara, was relieved to be rescued by her definitely pop-eyed neighbour, belatedly determined to do his duty and asking for the second time what her husband did, and if she lived in the district and how old her children were, wiping his rather lipless mouth on his napkin during her answers. Afterwards he favoured her with his views on the world's economic and political ills; Mr Heath's Stage Three, he informed Ellie would lead to an enormous fight with the unions; let them all—let Ellie—wait and see. They were in for an uncomfortable winter.

Much later, towards the end of the evening, Ellie had gone upstairs to the lavatory, and returned to find the place where she had been sitting taken. There was a free seat, however, on a sofa, next to the woman with red hair, who to Ellie's surprise was beckoning her over. Reluctantly and shyly she obeyed, observing meanwhile how composedly the woman sat, her knees together, her hands folded on her lap. She looked as comfortable and at ease as Ellie to her irritation did not, settling herself awkwardly besides Clara, the smile stiffening on her lips.

"You're Ellie, aren't you? Your husband told me. Let me introduce myself. I'm Clara, Clara Baker," Clara said.

"You were sitting next to Peter at dinner." Was all Ellie was able to say.

"Yes. He talked about you a lot. He seems a very devoted husband," said Clara, smiling.

"That can't have been interesting," replied Ellie. "I'm sorry about that."

"Not at all. I found myself wanting to meet you. And here we are."

She fell silent. Ellie tried desperately to think of something to add, while Clara watched her, still with a slight smile. At last

both of them began to speak at once, both had to halt, confusedly. Ellie never could remember afterwards much of what they said that first evening, though the first confusion over, they had talked for quite a time, sometimes even easily. She must have been a little light-headed, she thought. She remembered thinking that it had been a mistake to take brandy on top of wine. She also remembered the moment voices rose loudly from the far end of the room—she looked up, startled, to see that the boy who had sat next to her at dinner in sulky silence had turned belligerently talkative and was haranguing some of the other guests at the top of his voice. His mother was attempting, in vain, to quieten him.

"I'm surprised he's still around," remarked Ellie. "He didn't want to be here at all, and I heard Roberta telling him after dinner he could go if he wanted."

"Well, what do you expect. Precisely. They're like lovers, haven't you noticed? They can't leave each other alone. And she's the most helpless of the two."

"But they hate each other," said Ellie. "Look at them. Especially he hates her."

"Quite," insisted Clara. "Quite, quite, quite," smiling into Ellie's eyes with such provocation and charm, Ellie blushed in pleasure and surprise. She found herself so exhilarated suddenly by Clara's company, she could not stop smiling; idiotically, no doubt. Definitely she had had too much brandy. She looked in haste the other way.

The effect of the expensively but sparsely furnished room where they sat was anonymous, despite the books and ornaments arranged carelessly among plants, on glass-topped tables. It was lit, for the most part, by chilly spotlights angled against the walls to show off a number of abstract prints, but where their sofa stood, beneath an open window, a lamp with a dark-green shade had created a separate space, filled by the scent of honeysuckle from a creeper on the wall outside, an altogether subversive scent in these surroundings, mocking the vigour of the glossy but flowerless plants on the glass-topped tables.

"Isn't the honeysuckle wonderful," said Clara, throwing back her head; her mass of hair seemed to upholster the sofa. "Isn't it wonderful." She took great gulps of it. So did Ellie, she almost lost herself in the scent; and the next time she looked up, saw

Clara watching her with a look of such steady intensity it startled, even annoyed her, because she had so little expected it; because it was too like the intensity that had been growing in herself. Nor did she find entirely comfortable the flash of mutual understanding which passed between them. Clara too, appeared disconcerted, for when Ellie dared to glance at her again she saw that she had been fiddling so compulsively with one of her brown and silver earrings she had succeeded in extracting it, and sat in almost comical dismay, holding its glitter in her hand.

"You look lopsided," Ellie cried, and laughed awkwardly at what seemed too intimate a statement; she needed, rather, to step back a little.

"Will you put it in for me?" Clara asked after a long pause. "Will you?" she repeated. "I find it difficult without a mirror." She was holding out the earring already, and looking at Ellie almost beseechingly.

"Can't you . . . I . . . yes . . . all right," returned Ellie, taking it. Clara gave an audible gasp. Inclining her head towards Ellie she held back a curtain of red hair, not so far that it did not tickle Ellie's cheek as she fitted the hook to the almost invisible hole in Clara's ear. To do that she had to take the flesh between her fingers; she could smell Clara's faintly scented skin. She was almost drowning again, fumbling hastily in her haste to insert the fine hook. She was also, increasingly, embarrassed. What did this strange woman mean by such behaviour?

"Oh!" Clara was laughing and grimacing, "Try not to *pull*, Ellie, it hurts."

Damn. *Damn.* Would the wretched thing never go in? Ellie's cheeks by this time were scarlet. She sighed with relief when she had done.

Clara, on the other hand, seemed to have regained her composure. She was even mocking, Ellie decided, indignantly, feeling that she had been subjected to something against her will; quite what, she did not know, only that she had been taken by unfair surprise.

"Thank you, Ellie for performing that small service," Clara was saying. She laughed again; laid her hand briefly on Ellie's arm. Ellie, muttering something, turned her head away, but had to turn it back almost at once when she heard Clara say in an

entirely different tone, very formal, "Ellie, I don't think you've met my husband, Edmund."

She had not seen him come, or heard him. Nor had Clara shifted an inch, she was certain. Yet there the man sat on the arm of the sofa next to Clara, one hand on her shoulder; an uncomfortable hand, white, square, strong, too strong for his face, which though less bland and pink than she thought at first glance, beneath a thatch of thick, prematurely grey hair, had only partly eroded into a distinctive landscape; a landscape muted by mild spectacles, gold-rimmed, half-lensed, across which he stared at Ellie with an air of steely benevolence.

"Good evening, Ellie," he said, holding out one of his hands. To reach it Ellie had to lean across Clara, catching a waft of some elusive scent, and remain there, extended, because having taken her hand, he did not at once let it go, first examining the palm, then turning it over and examining the back, his eyes lowered to meet his half-lenses.

At last he returned it to her, remarking, dispassionately, "You have hands just like the Virgin Mary."

It was not a compliment, nor apparently meant as an insult. But it was an insult, so detached it was shocking. Her voice high, she said, much too quickly, "You have hands like a mole."

"Now, children," said Clara with an amused glance between them, her own hands still folded primly on her lap.

"You've said the same, Clara," observed Edmund, his voice cool and level. He was tapping his fingers on Clara's shoulder.

"Ellie comes from the other side of the river," Clara told him. She had stilled, astonishingly, since Edmund's coming. Her face, her body, even her jewelry seemed to have lost their movement and glitter. Yet she did not appear subdued. The two of them matched like a pair of stone figures, their mutual solidity so intense it was almost geological. The atmosphere of the room having loosened and softened, they sat overlooking it as an island of rock might sit, in the middle of marshland.

Everywhere were eruptions of voices and laughter. People leaned against or towards each other in familiar ways. Their bald host, Ellie saw, was fingering the neck of the smart but not pretty woman in the green dress; in his free hand he cradled a brandy glass. Other men, also, mimed desire for women not

their wives, laughing too loudly, touching openly or surreptitiously.

In a moment Clara rose, brushing herself down. Simultaneously Edmund stood up, though they had not exchanged a word or look. He was swaying slightly; Ellie understood for the first time that he might be drunk. Staring at him intently she could not be entirely sure, but she thought he must be. He had noticed her eyeing him and smiled as if he knew why she did.

"Will you excuse us, Ellie," Clara was saying in a formal voice. "It's been so pleasant meeting you."

The sense of chill, the inappropriate pang of loss and regret that Ellie felt, was eased a moment later by Clara's removing from her handbag a small address book with gold rimmed pages and a pencil inset into its spine. Still very politely she said, "I hope you will come to lunch with me, Ellie. Can I have your telephone number, please." This Ellie gave her, too taken aback, however, to remember to ask for Clara's. "I'll ring you soon," said Clara, nodding at her and smiling.

"Goodbye, Ellie," Edmund said. He took her hand with exaggerated care, bent his head to it, did not quite let it meet his lips. Above his spectacles his eyes were a greyish-blue, much paler than Clara's. In some lights they might have been blue entirely.

3 a.m. I can't sleep, so I've got up out of bed to write this. Peter is breathing very loudly in his sleep. You could not exactly call it snoring. I met a red-headed woman called Clara at a dinner-party this evening. We sat on a sofa and talked—about what?—I hardly know. Peter drove us home, afterwards. He said I wasn't fit to, but I don't think he was any fitter; in any case I felt more drunk on Clara than anything else. He was in a vile temper, as usual when he's had too much to drink. He started attacking me at once. Why did I have to be so petty and jealous? Couldn't he even talk to an attractive woman without my butting in? And then to cap it all I'd insisted on monopolising her. I said that I'd had the impression that we'd been monopolising each other, and when he did not answer, merely commented that Clara must be very peculiar to behave in such a way, I pointed out that just a moment ago he had said she was attractive. And so on. And so forth. Till near home we got tired of bickering and Peter said, "Another bloody lesbian, I suppose." His

standard joke about anyone not perceptive enough to fancy him. I don't find it funny any more, if I ever did. I don't think he expects me to, but it signalled a return to amicability. He even put his hand on my knee.

Ellie, most of her life, had been like someone asleep under water; everything conspired to keep her so, not least herself. She had progressed without difficulty from a prim day school to a boarding-school full of aspiring debutantes, and thence with rather more luck and a little more effort to an Oxford college, where she'd surfaced sufficiently to meet Peter, imprinting him on herself as a young duck will imprint on itself the first creature it sets eyes on. Four years later, after many vicissitudes, she had married him; she had never intended anything else and her will was far stronger than his.

She had graduated meanwhile from picture research at the BBC to a similar job in publishing, and thence to the picture editorship of a popular series of histories. In the evenings she had taken herself to art classes; life-drawing, painting, also a course in illustration; she had even tried her hand at designing picture books. Of course she'd intended working after her marriage, but her mother having fallen ill, her father had begged Ellie to come home and help nurse her. She had not since regretted agreeing to do this. But her pregnancy shortly after her mother's death had stopped her from seeking another job, and though she continued to work as a freelance, she gave up even that as her children grew more demanding, making drawings now and then purely for her own amusement. Peter always praised them fulsomely.

In the ten years of their marriage he had changed considerably; much more, Ellie felt, than she had changed. A tall, gangling man, with a head disconcertingly small for his size, neat features, bright brown eyes and many enthusiasms, he had at twenty-two written her charmingly melancholic letters bewailing the passing of his youth; since when time had taken its revenge for such premature complaint by not so much aging as dessicating him—he looked at thirty-six like a middle-aged schoolboy.

It was not that he lacked qualities. He was observant,

practical, an affectionate if sometimes competitive father, he knew how to be both considerate and kind. Finally he was very good at his job, moving from the industrial relations department of one large company to another, each time with a higher status and salary. In other words he seemed, he should have been, not only a successful but a contented man. Yet for some reason he was disappointed in his life. Everything disappointed him—his career, his children, his marriage—above all his marriage; each resentment ended therefore with Ellie who knew nothing other than to take his word for it, and consequently had come to live in guilt like an element.

And yet Peter loved her. More than that he adored her, had never considered for one moment seeking comfort from any other woman. Ellie's friends complained that out of her company he tended to talk about her excessively. It really was very strange.

Ellie had her defences of course. She had her drawing and her children. She also had her friends, in particular her rather bitchy friend Susie, the one woman whom she had encountered locally whom she did not find depressingly bland. Sharp, sandy, and with blue eyes which appeared to be looking different ways at once, Susie was not pretty in the least, but men liked her and tried to bed her; sometimes they succeeded. Peter had not tried to bed Susie as far as Ellie knew, but he certainly liked her. He even seemed to enjoy her and Ellie making common cause against him, as much as he did not enjoy some of Ellie's other defences—an imperviousness, for instance, that she had developed over the years.

The defence that riled him most, however, was the one that had always preserved her, not only against him, but against all attempts to contain her. She had first identified it at the age of fifteen, at a school confirmation class, and longing to accede to the urgings of a handsome young curate to "take Jesus into her heart"—for she could not. She could not, would not, surrender wholly to anyone or anything.

Perhaps the most tangible demonstration of this had come to be the diary she had kept since she was a child, and that she went on writing even when all else had failed. She had no literary pretensions in keeping it; often she did not enjoy the writing, finding her entries an onerous duty. And yet still she kept on

making them, day after day, week after week, year after year. In there somewhere was herself, much compressed, it was true, at times she felt her being reduced to the size of a cherry stone; but there the stone remained; there, no matter how puny, was her core.

Peter, whose subconscious instincts were acute, understood this very well. Thus it was her diary which drew his most bitter resentment. He complained whenever he caught her writing it, in a way he did not complain when he found her drawing. If he did not complain he mocked. Once or twice he quoted from it in front of her friends, but for that he always apologised profusely afterwards, once even, drunk, in tears. As the years went by she took to hiding her diary away, much as she had taken to hiding herself; which was, perhaps, the chief reason for Peter's resentment, that it stood for the place where he had never reached her, nor ever would; where, always an insecure man, he felt at his most insecure. But he did not understand this, and nor did Ellie. All she knew was that she distressed and infuriated him; and that sometimes, obstinately, she did it on purpose.

The redheaded woman Clara rang today. She sounded very formal, and invited me to lunch next Thursday. What will we have to say to one another?

And so began what Ellie would look back on afterwards as the period of wooing. Each in turn invited the other, Ellie driving the seven or eight miles to Clara's, Clara driving the same distance in reverse to have lunch with Ellie. On these first occasions, both of them took much trouble. Clara, her hair held back by an intricately-patterned scarf, its purple ground matching exactly the purple silk of the blouse she wore tucked into well-cut linen trousers, sliced up calves liver, while Ellie sat watching her, staining her fingers with its dark-red juice. Afterwards she turned the slices in well-seasoned flour, and sauteed them in a minimum of oil till perfectly tender but still pink in the middle. ("I have a passion for liver," she explained. "One day I'll find myself eating it raw, like that girl in Rosemary's Baby.") These they ate with rice and a mushroom salad at one end of her kitchen table, overlooking a garden

hemmed in by trees and bushes. Two huge chestnuts gave such deep and heavy shade that, except for the crumbling urn planted with pink geraniums in the middle of the lawn, it might have been a clearing in a wood.

Ellie's kitchen was in the basement of their house. Beyond one wall a lawn banked to eye-level, beyond the other a mossy wall. She had pondered for a long time on what she should give Clara to eat; in the end she baked mackerel with herbs from her garden. She too, like Clara, opened a bottle of wine, and after lunch led Clara on a tour of her house, just as Clara had led her.

She had been somewhat intimidated by the order prevailing in Clara's house—even when Clara threw open the doors of her two children's rooms these appeared as tidy as the rest, though quite different in character; the fifteen-year-old boy, Daniel's, lined with maps, the thirteen-year-old girl, Hannah's, having posters of pop stars, ballet dancers, and one for an exhibition by Chagall. She was not shown the largest room in the house, Edmund's studio where he designed his new work. (Today turned out to be a day he taught at a London art school, hence his absence.) This disappointed Ellie who would like to have seen what kind of sculptures he did—the only sign elsewhere was a couple of small abstract bronzes and some drawings in Clara's sitting-room, none recent, Clara said.

But when Clara opened the door of what she called her workroom, there was even less evidence of the nature of her work. Indeed it was not till this moment that Ellie learned that Clara did have work of her own. Small and dark, overlooking the front of the house, the room appeared at once crowded and bleak. There were two tall grey filing cabinets, a wall covered in books and a desk, bare save for a small stack of coloured folders, their edges exactly together, a stone jar filled with sharpened pencils, and an earthern saucer containing three green-veined stones and what looked like a mouse's skull. Ellie had scarcely time to take all this in before Clara had closed the door, meanwhile parrying her questions. She drew a little was all she would admit. For herself she showed no such inhibitions, by their second meeting had stripped Ellie of her life story like leaves off a tree. On Ellie showing her round her own house, she opened some doors before Ellie had time to,

including those of Sam and Lucy's rooms, something Ellie had been hoping to avoid since they were, as she feared, in their usual state of chaos.

"Clara, do you always look at every room in everybody's house?" she asked.

"Yes, always," Clara replied, with the merest hint of a smile.

Ellie's second visit to Clara's was much less formal than the first. Nor this time did they eat alone; Clara's au-pair girl joined them, also her daughter Hannah, excused afternoon school for some unspecific reason. (Was she having menstrual trouble, Ellie wondered. She might have had stomach ache; certainly she scowled a lot.) A tall girl, she ate very little and left the table early, saying she did not want one of, the peaches which followed the paté. Apart from this and the preliminary introductions she scarcely exchanged a word with her mother, Ellie noticed. Once, sharply and anxiously, Clara told her to sit up.

As soon as she left Edmund arrived. Though smiling benignly, he appeared abstracted and revealed even less of himself than he had at their first meeting. He again shook Ellie's hand, but this time did not keep it. "Oh good," he murmured when she told him politely that she was well, saying little thereafter except to make two not very good jokes, with a sly offhandedness. Twice, however, Ellie had caught him glancing between herself and Clara, in his face a hint of what? Mockery? She could not quite make out, but it puzzled her. The two half-cans of lager he drank did not appear to loosen his tongue. At last, he made coffee for them, then excused himself as formally as Clara might have done, on the grounds of work, though he surprised and embarrassed Ellie by adding to his goodbye a firm kiss on the lips, a mark he said of her fast-developing friendship with Clara.

"If it's not my due yet, it will be," he added, smiling, before removing himself and a mug of coffee to his studio upstairs.

Ellie did not dare to look at Clara.

Finally Isabel, the au-pair girl, departed, having helped them clear the table. Clara said, "Ellie, will you forgive me? Isabel is going to make soup later, but I want to prepare the vegetables now. If I leave her to do it she throws away half of them at least." So they sat down again on either side of the wooden

table, each with a bowl and sharp knife, Ellie having offered to help. Clara was, she discovered, as frugal as some French housewife, carefully washing and chopping up the outside leaves of leaks for instance, which Ellie would have discarded.

"How economical you are, Clara," Ellie said.

"Of course," said Clara. "I've had to be. We were poor when I was a child, and Edmund's career has been very up and down. You can't think, can you, that he's always been so successful as he is now?"

"No, but how should I?" replied Ellie with sudden annoyance. "You've dug my whole life-story out of me, but what do I know about you? You don't say anything."

"You have only to ask, my dear," replied Clara, primly.

"I have asked. I'm asking."

"Then where do you want me to start?"

"At the beginning?" suggested Ellie.

"Do you call my parents a beginning? Yes, I will tell you about my parents. Another time you can tell me about yours."

Her father, Clara said, had been a Highland Scot, born on the Island of Skye. As a young man he'd worked in New York, and there met her mother, the daughter of a Hungarian couple who had left Hungary at the turn of the century; or rather run away from it, for while Clara's grandfather had been a gentile, her grandmother came from an orthodox Jewish family in a small town near Budapest, hence both sets of parents had been opposed to the marriage.

"But that was it," Clara said. "I think they used up all their energy in running away, they never had any afterwards, nor did their children. My mother met my father when she was eighteen, followed along behind him till he died, then married someone else. She lives in San Francisco now."

"Does all this make you an American?" asked Ellie. "You don't sound American. Were you brought up there?"

"Because I'm not American. And I wasn't brought up there. My father insisted on coming back to Europe; except for the war we trailed round Italy my entire childhood, existing from hand to mouth while he painted not very good pictures and my mother tried desperately to be respectable. I met Edmund in Italy. He took me back to England and art school and we've stayed here ever since, but it was much too late for me to feel

English. I don't feel anything. Not Italian. Certainly not American. I've got a British passport, that's all."

"You *sound* English," Ellie said.

"You can't see through it?" asked Clara. "It's an act. Protective colouring. I take my cue from Edmund, he was born and bred in Weston-Super Mare, what could be more English than that? Poor Edmund, he spent half his childhood in Baptist chapels, his parents were thundering Evangelicals. He absolutely hates God, in consequence."

"You mean after the Evangelicals he still believes in God?" said Ellie.

Clara laughed. "You'd better ask Edmund."

"And what about you? Do you?"

"Unfortunately I seem to," answered Clara viciously demolishing a carrot. "It must be all those rabbis in my genes, not to mention Highlanders. It would make life much easier if I didn't."

Later—they had returned to her sitting-room by this time with their second cups of coffee, both having their shoes off and their feet drawn up at either end of a long sofa—she said, "That was very kind of you, Ellie. Thank you. You're not in a hurry are you? Do you think you could help me with something else? There's a picture I've wanted to take to the framer for weeks, but it's too large to carry on my own. We'll have to wait till it stops raining. You wouldn't mind very much?"

"Not at all," Ellie said, though hoping, fervently, for the rain to continue to fall; she would have been quite happy to stay as they were.

Clara's smile was tender when Ellie dared to look. She sat tranquilly, her deepset eyes half hooded by their generous lids, and did not appear to observe Ellie's gaze. Ellie grew bolder. She stared at Clara so intently, she noticed for the first time the fine red down along Clara's upper lip; while the line of her lips, both delicate and firm, reminded her of something—she did not know what. The fugitive memory slipped away before she could catch it, leaving her at once comforted and sad, and with a sense of that unlikely intimacy she had felt between them the first evening they had met, and not quite in the same way since. The difference this time was that she was entirely sober; as indeed was Clara, who jumped to her feet, smoothing down her striped cotton skirt.

"Look," she said, "The rain's stopping. We ought to get moving."

The picture, large as she had said, five foot by three and complete with frame and mount, was an early drawing of Edmund's, done before he had turned to the abstractions that these days, said Clara, mainly engaged him. Other than that, she made no further comment, maintaining such a look of concentration as she gazed at it, that Ellie did not like to comment either. Besides she could not have. Between surprise, pleasure and somewhere, definitely, embarrassment, she was gasping. A marvellously bold female nude done in red chalk, the drawing might have been of a younger Clara.

The intense sexuality of its details, however—not only lavish, well-rounded flesh, but nipples upstanding, genitals openly displayed between the woman's parted thighs, an abundance of pubic hair, defied any such questions. It was hers, Clara told Ellie, the first drawing Edmund had given her. It had hung in their bedroom, but had fallen off the wall, shattering the glass, hence the need to replace it.

It had only just stopped raining when they went out. The sun made everything glitter and steam, and drew hot, sweet essences out of all the gardens. The picture, though not heavy, turned out awkward to carry. After various experiments they held it between them, face-upwards, taking up most of the pavement. They could just as easily have carried it face- downwards. Ellie did try to turn it over, but Clara said, her face wide and innocent, "Surely it's not embarrassing you, is it, Ellie?"

"A bit," Ellie said, "As you know perfectly well."

"Oh you little prude. Well then, if you insist."

Clara was teasing her. They faced each other, Clara trying to turn the picture the other way about, Ellie resisting it; a small battle of wills in which each surrendered simultaneously with exasperated giggles. And so they set off again, the nude still in view. Glancing round surreptitiously in the hope they would not meet too many people, Ellie saw Clara give her a caustic look, as if she knew quite well what she was thinking; probably she did.

Not everyone, of course, noticed what they were carrying, some only did when Clara and Ellie were almost past. They

would turn and stare back, their faces startled, first at the picture and afterwards at its bearers, as if they too might be naked by association. Ellie trying to avoid their eyes invariably caught them; not Clara, she continued describing blithely and at length some encounter she'd once had in a bookshop, as if everything was perfectly normal and they were not threading their way precariously and awkwardly over wet pavements almost too narrow to hold them, round people, animals, pushchairs, prams, pursued by amused or scandalized looks and the hilarity of children.

When they reached the framers, however, all returned to order and sobriety; the assistant laying on the picture a purely mathematical eye. The street, too, felt different when they emerged, less hectic, more tender. But the clouds were banking up once more and darkening. Clara took Ellie's arm and murmured something she could not catch. Ellie found herself, confusedly, telling her she must get back or Lucy and Sam would be there before her; and anyway, she added, wasn't it going to rain?

"Probably," Clara said, her bare arm caressing Ellie's. Even their silence so engrossed them, they passed Ellie's car and had to retrace their steps. The sky, meanwhile, grew blacker and blacker. A heavy drop fell on Ellie's head.

"Goodbye, my dear," said Clara gently, as they stood by Ellie's car, arranging to meet again next week. Suddenly she leaned forward—Ellie thought she was about to kiss her. Instead Clara raised her hand, ran a finger along Ellie's top lip and murmured, "Did you hurt yourself once? Did you know you have a scar? At least that's what it looks like?"

And then she kissed her on the lips. (But she did that to everyone, Ellie had noticed.) And watched while, confusedly, Ellie climbed into her car and drove away. She was halfway home when the storm broke in earnest. Her windscreen wipers could hardly cope with the stream of water—even running from the car to the house she was soaked to the skin.

She went straight upstairs to change, but having torn off her clothes she did not replace them immediately; instead stood close to the mirror, naked as she was, peering at her face. What scar was this that Clara referred to? She never knew she had one and now could not find it, though she took off her glasses in

order to peer more closely. All her features—nose, mouth, eyes, chin, seemed freakish and independent of each other at close quarters, only forming a whole again when she settled her glasses back on her face, noting as she did so, with pleasure and relief, the familiar, calm gaze of her grandmother from the gold-framed portrait that hung above her bed. At which she heard Lucy, plaintive, in the hall. "Mum, I'm *wet*," so threw some garments on and went down, to be told that she had, as usual, and despite promises, forgotten to buy the biscuits that Lucy liked. She apologised nicely. And all the while her heart kept jumping, still she repeated in her head what she had repeated the whole way home. "Clara, Clara, Clara."

Nothing, thank God, was ever like this between me and Susie! Whatever is happening? What does Clara want? What do I *want, come to that? It's hard to convey how provocative she was being this afternoon, how ludicrous we were lugging that, yes, indecent picture through the streets in broad daylight, both of us in the end half-crazy, egging each other on. Every time I think about it I find myself laughing out loud. The next thing is I'm enraged, I want to stamp and shout at being made such a fool of.*

The next week Clara rang and said she was miserable but something had cropped up, she could not come to lunch after all. Indeed to Ellie's disappointment, and also, perversely, her relief, they had no chance to meet the following week either, for the holidays started. Clara disappeared to France for the rest of the summer, and Ellie and her family went to a cottage in Wales.

It was September before they saw each other again, not at either of their houses, but at an Indian restaurant in London. "I'll buy you lunch, we should celebrate," Clara said over the telephone, though she did not say what or why they should celebrate.

To her annoyance Ellie found herself both excited and uneasy at the prospect. The things she had been imagining two months ago seemed ridiculous now, yet they would not quite leave her alone. The night before their meeting she was distracted enough to drop an apple flan at Peter's feet, upside down of course. They ate it anyway; Peter said it was much too delicious to

waste. When Sam and Lucy came in and discovered them sitting on the floor greedily supping up the flan with silver spoons, they clearly thought their parents had gone mad. Peter laughed, and Ellie laughed too, then suddenly remembered Clara and choked and could eat no more, so gave her spoon to them. Why haven't I told Peter I'm having lunch with Clara? she asked herself. And what is Clara thinking now?

In the event it seemed that whatever Clara had been thinking it could have had little to do with Ellie. Her greeting when they met outside the tube was cool, almost bored, her kiss brief and on Ellie's cheek. She asked Ellie about her holidays, gave a laconic account of her own and then fell silent. She appeared nervous; her face set and heavy, she looked much less vivid than usual, as if she had somehow quenched herself. Even her hair was subdued, concealed by a brown and white scarf. In the restaurant both of them ate without appetite, talking desultorily. Ellie had to search desperately, sometimes, for anything to say. Clara, her head against a hugely blown-up and grainy photograph of the Taj Mahal, would hesitate, break off her sentences midway, look aside, past Ellie, for no apparent reason. When her laugh rang out it was discordant and noisy.

Ellie, more and more despondent, remembered her hot fantasies with growing amazement and shame. She wondered if Clara was disappointed on remeeting her. She eyed her so broodingly; she answered so sharply some of Ellie's hesitant remarks on the subject of the bombs which kept going off in London. (You had to assume normality, she said; you could not spend every moment fearing you would be blown up if you went for a ride on a train.) By this time they had finished eating. The waiter removed the still half-full dishes with a disappointed look; it was delicious, Clara assured him.

Ellie had come to expect that they would part at once. Instead, Clara, in a brusque voice, suggested a walk in some gardens they were passing on the way to the tube. The streets looked dirty, littered with paper and smelling of dog, but the day was beginning to be sunny, and the gardens were better. Quite quickly they calmed Clara—her pace slowed, and while she did not speak, her thoughts felt kinder. They walked very slowly, close together, as on their last meeting. It was a perfect September day, no longer hot, but pleasantly warm. Hardly a

leaf had begun to turn, both trees and blossoms burgeoned generously, but without the painful prick and urgency of still-growing things.

The gardens were not large. After a while they left the gravelled paths and sauntered across lawns, skirting rhododendrons and other shrubs, under trees, round flowerbeds. Passing the entrance for the third time Clara said hesitantly, "Do you want to go back? Are you in a hurry?" Ellie, as sure of herself as she had been unsure earlier, laughed and said, "No, if you're not. Why don't we sit down for a bit?" pointing at a seat nearby, secluded among bushes and trees, the grass about it green and lush.

"How peaceful it is," Clara said quietly. Ellie, studying the foliage overhead—small, shivering, silver leaves set against a denser mass of darker ones, the sky beyond turned almost white—made no more answer than a nod while with one finger she traced the grain of the bleached wooden seat. She could not remember why she had been so anxious, let alone what it felt like. She closed her eyes, traced, precisely, the areas of sun and shade on her body, and heard a long way off what she had been waiting for, though she had not known she was waiting.

"Ellie," Clara was saying. "Ellie?" She opened her eyes to find Clara watching her intently; in the interval she had unbound her scarf, tossing her head so that her brilliant hair flew in all directions, and now, very tenderly, she reached out and pushed Ellie's hair back behind her ears, leaving her hand resting on Ellie's neck. Clara's hand was curtained by Ellie's long brown hair.

"It's absurd," Clara said, as if she was not talking to Ellie but someone far away. "It's absurd. I'm so very attracted to you physically; did you know?" Ellie looked at her, devoid of answers, her breath seemingly trapped inside her throat.

At last, a little shrilly, because of the time she had scarcely felt able to breathe, she said, "I'm not afraid of it." (And wondered why she had said that; she had never for a moment considered fear.)

"I am. It's never happened to me before; at least not like this."

"You mean with a woman?" Ellie asked. Though stunned, she was much the calmer of the two; she did not yet know what was happening to her.

"I thought, if I told you . . . I thought if I dared say, you . . . you might say you never wanted to see me again . . ."

Suddenly Clara was pleading, plucking at her breast. The next moment—Ellie was not aware of having assented but she must have—Clara had leaned forward, glanced round her hurriedly, then put her hand on Ellie's shoulder and kissed her several times upon the mouth; very cool, soft kisses.

"Oh, aren't we timid," she said, laughing, and drew back a little, though continuing to eye Ellie flirtatiously. And both began laughing at the absurdity of it, the way they sat there, awkwardly swivelled, on the uncompromisingly slatted seat. Ellie, the colour creeping into her cheeks, felt quite faint with emotion, at the same time quite unreal.

"Look at my hand, Ellie, it's shaking; it's all your fault," Clara was saying. She advanced her face towards Ellie once more. How strange, Ellie was thinking, to be so close to another woman's skin; how soft a woman's lips felt, compared . . . Her own began parting almost of their own accord; but at this Clara instantly withdrew. She stared at Ellie wildly for a moment then shook herself all over like a dog, and when she stilled her face was shuttered. Ellie could not imagine why; had she in her turn been precipitate? The coolness and deliberation with which Clara spoke terrified her, at last.

"Perhaps it's time we were getting home," Clara said. Briefly her face broke its order as she picked up her scarf and raised her hands to rebind her hair, then directing a small smile at random she folded it instead, and replaced it in her handbag, which she closed with a percussive click. And though they walked to the station, fondly, arm-in-arm, and made an arrangement for her to come to lunch at Ellie's the following week (neither so much as hinting that it was in Ellie's house they could be sure of being alone), she gave the definite impression she wanted to be gone; an impression belied, momentarily, by the look she gave Ellie as they parted.

The summer had almost passed; threats were growing. Ellie heard on the news at six o'clock that the IRA had let off another bomb in London; that in Cairo, even as she and Clara ate—or failed to eat—their celebration lunch, Egypt and Syria were re-establishing relations with King Hussein of Jordan, and that in Chile the junta had taken over; Allende was dead. Did Allende

commit suicide while she and Clara were together, Ellie found herself wondering. She tried to work it out, yelling, "Shut *up*, shut *up*," at Sam and Lucy who were arguing at the other end of the room.

Now what? Now what? Clara has such beautiful dark eyebrows and lashes; though her eyes are grey they are flecked with gold and green. She has taken away my sense entirely. (Oh why, oh why, can't Peter get his hair decently *cut?)*

In bed, two nights running, Ellie was overwhelmed by terrifying lust; terrifying, because it was so hugely, unrelentingly impersonal and seemed to have nothing to do with Clara or anyone else. She lay trying to calm herself, and after sweating and trembling as long as she could bear, fell on Peter in a fury that clearly astonished and delighted him, but left her appalled. Their lovemaking felt as sinful as adultery. Again she told herself not to be absurd, yet that was how it felt.

The week crept by. There was scarcely a moment Ellie did not think of Clara, and scarcely a moment, Clara said, when she did not think of Ellie. On Wednesday the IRA placed bombs in Oxford Street and Chelsea. On Thursday the Israelis shot down thirteen Syrian MIGs. On Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday Clara phoned Ellie; once from a callbox. On Friday she phoned twice. Both times she rang in the afternoon it was Lucy who answered; on the second occasion she handed Ellie the receiver saying, "It's your friend, Clara, *again*," with a scornful amusement, which made Ellie blush. But Lucy, fortunately, did not remain to see, and on went Clara and Ellie, tenderly, as usual, laughing, teasing each other, saying, "Yes, I went here, I read that; Edmund (or Peter) did this; the children did that; I cooked such and such for dinner yesterday. Now tell me what you did?" And so on. Ad infinitum. One day when Clara was ringing from home they talked in this manner for something like an hour, Ellie, looking at the clock, could scarcely believe how much time had passed. She did little work all week. She could not. She found it difficult even to write her diary. Her feelings seemed much too rich and strong to catch.

It rained most of Monday. The Times reported that one of the

skylab spiders had died. It had nothing else to say of interest. All morning a trembling Ellie tidied up the house. She prepared a simple but appropriately delectable lunch, then went upstairs and tried on this garment and that before the mirror in desperate indecision as to what would suit her best. (She had never before, she realised, pivoting, dressed-up for a woman.) At one o'clock precisely, as arranged, Clara arrived, wearing a neat brown mackintosh and orange scarf tied gypsy-fashion, and carrying a bag containing another silk scarf, from Liberty's, as a present for Ellie. But she had scarcely given her time to shut the door before she had seized Ellie in her arms. Their kisses this time were so very far from timid, neither of them noticed when the carrier bag fell to the floor.

But what had Ellie expected? If seduction, it would be very cautious she thought; a slow rising of desire as they lingered over her carefully Lucullian lunch, leading perhaps to a discreet embrace on bed or sofa. But instead Clara broke off her preliminary kisses before they had made any move towards the kitchen, murmuring into Ellie's mouth, "Oh darling, darling, don't let's wait another minute," and the next moment was leading her upstairs, and into the crowded, russet-walled bedroom where with her back to Ellie she started tearing off her clothes, almost before Ellie had time to draw the curtains.

A dazed Ellie, wishing her own underwear was as elegant, followed suit, removing the garments she had only just so carefully put on; a few minutes later she found herself lying on her marriage bed alongside an equally naked and thus unfamiliar Clara, her red hair embracing both sets of shoulders. It was a dismaying, rather than immediately enjoyable event. What am I doing here, she found herself asking, as she gazed at the recumbent Clara's firm but ample flesh; the marks of time and childbirth on her hips and belly merely added to the sense of dissociation that she felt. (This is *crazy*. What can we be thinking of?) Of those vast, terrifying areas of white skin—did women always appear so much bigger without their clothes? As for herself, what must she look like? What did Clara make of her? (This is ridiculous. This is absurd.) Conscious of Clara's eyes, turned a much darker grey and staring at her, it seemed, unblinkingly, Ellie turned her head away; only to hear at once what she'd have least expected, the sound of Clara starting to

laugh, uncontrollably, her body shaking besides Ellie's. At last, pulling Ellie's head down on her full but not quite youthful breast, Clara cried out, "The real problem, Ellie, is that I haven't the faintest idea how to start; do you? It's all new to me. I only know about men; about Edmund."

In her relief Ellie began laughing too.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter, I suppose." Clara, leaning on one arm looked down at Ellie. Gently she reached down and touched the nipple nearest her; Ellie watched it starting up as if it belonged to someone else. "I daresay it only needs a little imagination," Clara was murmuring. "Oh darling, you can't think how funny and sexy you look, naked and spectacled together. Aren't you going to take your glasses off?"

"But then I won't be able to see you," Ellie protested.

"So much the better," said Clara, firmly removing them. "You won't be able to see how old and battered I am." She leaned over Ellie to lay the glasses down beside the bed, then remained there, on top of her, kissing gently each eye in turn.

"I think I'm beginning to have some good ideas after all. For someone who's had two children, you do have the most beautiful firm breasts, Ellie; like apples; like goblets. Darling little sister; let's suck on childish things childishly, and just not care a bit."

And so they did. And so things went on. Clara's lack of inhibition astonished Ellie; as did her own in the end. They did not sit down for lunch till it was nearly time for the children to come home from school. Hugely hungry, giggling, in a state of outward and inward disarray, they peeled grapes for each other, passing them from hand to hand or even mouth to mouth, letting lips and fingers linger as long as possible. Thereafter these two heterosexual housewives returned their bodies, limp with expended passion and smelling of each other, to the custody of the husbands and children they assumed that they adored.

Over the next two weeks, by dint of ignoring their friends, and skimping on things they ought to have been doing, Ellie and Clara contrived to see one another at least every two or three days. Both swore they grudged each second they spent apart. Both claimed that even then they thought only of each other.

Ellie knew perfectly well such a state of affairs could not last, but she did not let herself dwell on the knowledge, preferring instead to dwell in this present in which having, passionately, made love, she and Clara lay in each other's arms and promised eternal devotion. Ellie, possibly, took these vows the more literally, though she warned herself not to. It was Clara, on the other hand, who indulged in the wildest fantasies. Why didn't they buy a cottage in the country, she and Edmund, Ellie and Peter? Sometimes they could go down there all four together; sometimes she and Ellie would be able to go alone. How about Wiltshire? Or Somerset? Or Wales? And when the children were older, maybe they could all drive across the Sahara, she knew other people who'd done that. And maybe, sooner, she and Ellie could take a small holiday on their own—what could be more innocuous, two women friends together, while their husbands stayed at home to look after their families? They could go to Venice; or Granada. And what about Aix-en-Provence during the festival? It would be bliss to hear *The Marriage of Figaro* together—or *Cosi Fan Tutte*. And if Ellie noticed that sometimes during these delightful conversations Clara would fall silent, a darker, brooding look on her face, she refused to take that as an omen. Even aware they were fantasies, she let herself ponder over and sometimes build on their plans, enough to know that she'd feel cheated, though resigned, when they did not come to pass.

None of this went into her diary. Her feelings were in such disarray, she could barely isolate, let alone describe them. She found it difficult to set down anything except the most bald and inhibited accounts of her meetings with Clara. She could not go on, day after day, writing I love her, I love her, I love her. Nor did she feel able to make an ecstatic catalogue of Clara's attractions and virtues. It was not that she did not want to; she did not know how to.

After the first week or so of the affair, Lucy returned home from school with some tools and materials for lino-cutting that she'd swopped with one of her friends. Her enthusiasm barely survived the weekend; after that Ellie could try her hand. She enjoyed herself, glad for once to be distracted from the new and furious energies Clara aroused in her, by the problem of working in blocks of dark and light. Despite the thoughts of

Clara which informed every minute of her work, she resisted the temptation to show a naked female body; her attempts to portray Clara were much more abstract than that. None of them were satisfactory, however. She tore up everything she did and told no one about it. She did not know why she failed to tell Clara, considering that she told her everything else, but in particular she did not want to tell Clara, though she had once discussed her drawing with her, even shown her some of her work and heard Clara urge her to make something of it. "All in good time," she murmured, when Ellie begged to see some of her drawings in return.

Elsewhere, of course, life went on as usual. National leaders met at one place or another. Reports of torture and murder were coming out of Chile. England continued, gently, to decay. It was this week someone compared the present mood with the mood of the thirties, except that now people felt still more helpless, the ills around them all due to forces beyond their control.

"What difference does it make?" Ellie said to Clara. "When haven't most people always been helpless? Have you ever felt anything but helpless, Clara?"

Clara had come to lunch again. They were so much less formal now that Ellie only gave her bread and cheese and fruit, and even that wasn't ready when Clara arrived. She had spent the morning cleaning up her kitchen, and Clara found her in the middle of defrosting her fridge, a ridiculous task because as usual she had left it till the freezing compartment was completely iced up around dismal packages of fish fingers and frozen peas, and was trying ineffectually to chip out huge hunks of ice with a bread knife. Clara looked appalled at first and then began to laugh. She made Ellie fetch a hairdryer, something she had never thought of but which was very effective. Next time she inserted her knife, great sheets came away in her hand, and she carried them over to the sink. She had opened a bottle of wine; they giggled and drank all the time till the job was done, then went cold-fingered and slightly tipsy to bed where they teased each other with the chill, shrieking loudly at every touch.

"Shush, shush, shush," said Clara severely. "Do you want all your neighbours to hear?"

After they had made love they grew more serious. As they lay

on their backs holding hands, Clara asked Ellie about the portrait over the bed; which led to Ellie telling her about her mother and her grandmother, setting out baldly and flatly the mythology with which she'd grown up—her mother had been an inveterate, even an obsessive story-teller. Her grandparents, she said, had loved each other so much that her grandfather, reluctantly, left the navy, his first love, because it took him away too often from his second love, Ellie's grandmother, the woman in the portrait, then pregnant with their third child; a few weeks later she had fallen downstairs, gone into premature labour and died, and with her the son they had both longed for. He had never got over it. For the duration of the first world war he'd gone back into the navy, thereafter drifted from one unsatisfactory job to another, while his two small daughters, Ellie's mother and her older sister, were passed round a succession of reluctant aunts and dreary boarding-schools. He remarried in time. A few years later, having had one more child, a son, he took to gambling on dogs and horses, ran up a not very large debt, grew more depressed than ever and gassed himself, desolating Ellie's mother who had loved, even worshipped him—inappropriately in Ellie's father's opinion. (He had not thought highly of his father-in-law; it was the only opinion Ellie's father ever expressed about the past, and even that was roundabout, inferred rather than said.)

"Poor them," said Clara thoughtfully when this story was done. "Poor her. Poor you."

"Why me? It was all such a long time ago; years before I was born."

"But these things reverberate through generations; they must do. It does affect you, it'll affect your Lucy, if it hasn't already."

"Perhaps," Ellie said. She held up her hand, eyeing the small, rather worn signet ring on her little finger. "That belonged to my mother," she said. "She gave it to me when she was dying; the same day she told me about my grandfather's suicide. She died of cancer. I told you."

"Yes, cancer, you told me," Clara said. She was holding up her own hand now and bending the fingers slowly in. "That's it," she said, "That's how I always see it, cancer the crab; with its greedy little claws."

"Yes," said Ellie. "That's it exactly." All the same she wished

Clara had not spoken. For it brought back to her at once an uncomfortably complete picture of her mother lying in her hospital bed; in particular on the day she'd been given the ring. Even though it had been a remission day, the disease had still been closing in, with yes, its greedy little claws—that was always, she realised, precisely how she had seen it.

On that day, because of the remission, her mother's ever more blurred and disconnected speech had been restored to something near normal. She had even demanded a mirror from Ellie and insisted on making herself up unaided. But her hand still very weak, the bright red lipstick had not quite followed the line of her lips, and the faintly clownish result, augmented by the scarf tied rakishly round her head to hide the patch they'd shaved when they'd operated on her, filled Ellie with such irritation and fear, with such angry shame, she picked up her mother's hand, then looked away guiltily so as not to have to see. Her mother did not seem to have noticed. She went straight on with the story of her father's suicide.

It was after this that she took the ring off her own little finger and insisted on placing it on Ellie's. "What tiny hands you have, Ellie," she said fondly, holding it in place, while Ellie, staring fixedly at the mark where the ring had been, marvelled, detachedly, at the paleness of her mother's hands. How smooth they were, besides. At home, all her life, jars of hand cream had stood at every sink and basin, to no avail, no matter how much of it she rubbed into her skin her mother's hands remained rough and chapped and red. Sometimes the skin between her fingers had cracked right open; Ellie remembered her wincing as she applied the soothing cream. But there were no cracks now. Her hands were neither rough nor red, nor ever would be again, she realised. Removing her own hand as gently as she could, twisting the ring round and round on her finger—at the back the gold looked fine enough to break at the slightest pressure—she had a sudden vivid memory of the almost unfelt, almost unbearable sound and sensation of her mother's hands catching on cloth when they had used to to embrace each other.

In a while Ellie and Clara made love again. After they had done, the shadowed room appeared calm and purified, as if they had purified it, Ellie thought. But she did not see how they could.

"I suppose we should get up," said Clara, one hand on Ellie's thigh. "What time is it, Ellie?"

She did not wait for an answer, throwing back the covers abruptly, and climbing to her feet. "How beautifully abandoned you look, Ellie," she sighed rather than said, before starting to pull on the clothes she had laid neatly ready. "Oh you little voyeur," she added, laughing, because Ellie's eyes never left her the while. But she did not seem to object. Indeed all her actions were so slow and considered it must have been for Ellie's benefit. Lazily, comfortably, she leaned over to fasten her bra; put one leg on a chair, pulled on a stocking and did up the suspender, glancing at Ellie from under an arm and smiling but without a word. As slowly, deliberately, she changed legs and attended to its fellow; while Ellie, watching, experienced again the same catch in her breath that she had felt on first realising that such seductiveness (of stocking, suspender, knicker satin, of the perfect milk-white gap between nylon, lace and satin) had been prepared for her delight.

"God knows," Clara said, zipping up her skirt at last, and pulling her sweater down over it, "God knows when we'll be able to do this again."

"Soon, I hope," said Ellie. And more anxiously when Clara made no answer. "Soon?"

"Maybe," Clara, leaning against the mantlepiece was observing Ellie closely. Ellie, huddling the bedclothes about her, did not know what to think. Clara continued, conversationally. "I don't know what effect all this is having on you, Ellie, but I seem to have spent the past two weeks in a permanent high wind. It's marvellous but very disturbing. It can't go on like this. How can it?"

"Why not?" asked Ellie, filled with foreboding. Jumping out of bed she huddled by the radiator, glad of its warmth, while Clara went on, "What about Edmund and Peter? What about your children and mine? How can such obsession not affect them?"

"*Are* we obsessed?" asked Ellie, covering herself with a shirt. "Aren't we?" said Clara, her voice suddenly much softer. "Oh Ellie, what a shame, to hide your luscious flesh."

"It's yours, whenever you like," said Ellie, as casually as she knew how.

"I know. That's the whole trouble. It's so utterly distracting. I can't work, for thinking about it." Clara threw up her hands, while Ellie wondered, as usual, what work, but it hardly seemed the appropriate occasion to ask.

"Doesn't it affect your work?" Clara pressed her.

"Why should it? And what does it matter?" At this moment Ellie could have told Clara about the line cuts, but failed to. Why? she wondered, in passing, but it did not seem significant now.

"Of course it matters, you little goose. How can we go on being so disrupted? What is there but work, in the end?"

"That sounds a bit portentous," said Ellie. "There's you, Clara. You're much more fun than work."

She was being defensive now, and knew it. She was shocked, yet not entirely surprised by the fury with which Clara hissed at her, "Don't dare use me for an excuse. Not for anything. Not ever!" She had Ellie by the shoulders. She was almost shaking her. "In particular as an excuse not to work. I won't have it. I won't have it."

"No," Ellie said. "You're right. I must draw." But the prospect at the moment desolated her, implying as it did an existence without Clara.

Clara shrugged and softened. "Never mind. Don't look so forlorn." Suddenly she flung her arms round Ellie's shoulders, hugged her there beside the radiator, its warmth mottling Ellie's calf, while the wool of Clara's sweater, the rougher tweed of her skirt, printed their textures on her arms and still naked thighs.

For all the fondness of her farewells, Clara left Ellie that day, for the first time, uneasy. Only a little, but enough. After dinner she hunted out the diaries which she kept stacked in a suitcase at the top of her wardrobe in no kind of order; five, ten years back jumbled up with eighteen and twenty. It took some time to locate the one she was after. Within its faded red cover, on the front doodles in biro, on the back printed tables of weight and measurement, were the entries covering the period of her mother's illness and death. She found them surprisingly laconic. Perhaps she had not been able to express those feelings either. Perhaps grief kept at bay by the minutiae of daily events, she had not had any feelings to speak of. Instead medical and

topographical details were interspersed; in one entry she had moved directly from describing the snow on the fretted wooden awning of the station near the hospital to noting her mother's weakening pulse. (Day after day she remembered holding her mother's wrist, wondering when the pulse would cease, expecting it to, hourly, but it did not, day after day, while the snow lay on the ground outside. "Such obstinacy. LIFE FORCE," she had written and encircled the words with a leaky blue pen.)

On the day of her mother's funeral she wrote only. "Coffin; pale wood; flowers; under them, inside the wood, the body that bore me." She shuddered now at such a dramatic way of putting it. Yet it was the essence, precisely, of what she had felt, still felt, still could not comprehend, still could scarcely endure. They had stood in the pew that day, before a congregation of cousins and neighbours and friends, she in a red coat above what felt in the circumstances, indecently lively and pulsating flesh, holding hands with Peter, her sister Janetta glowering beneath a borrowed fur hat, her father chewing his partly ginger moustache, her little, dumpy aunt, her brother lustily bellowing the hymns, and each one of them, except Peter, had had in some way or other the most intimate connection with the lifeless corpse wrapped in its shroud and boxed in oak, about to be interred in Kentish soil in the graveyard of St Mary the Virgin. Dust to dust; ashes to ashes. Did the wood crumble and distintegrate? Ellie wondered. Would there be any coffin now? Certainly there'd be no body, nothing left of her mother but skull and skeleton; no flesh, no womb; no safe places any more, only the grave itself.

How familiar everything had been that day, she thought. Death alone had been unfamiliar; it remained unfamiliar. She felt it particularly indecent to have lain in bed with a woman whose body she had just so intimately explored, remembering in such detail her dying mother. But that was how it was. And having started, it went on, for here she was thinking about Clara and remembering the funeral. Stop it, she told herself, stop it. But it did not stop. The two remained inextricably entangled in her head; images of love and Clara alternating with memories of her mother and of death.

A few days later Clara came again. Despite what she had said

the last time, they went to bed, and after making love had one of those beguiling but foolish conversations in which lovers take an affair apart minute by minute, from the beginning. Do you remember . . . ? At which point did you first . . . ? How soon did you . . . ? And so on and so forth. It was brought to an end suddenly, when Clara asked Ellie, abruptly, how she felt about making love to another woman. She claimed herself to find nothing difficult in it or strange. It even felt natural. "Your body just feels softer than a man's, that's all," she said, and lying in her arms Ellie did not find it hard to agree.

Yet at other times, she confessed, it still did seem strange, even alarming. Occasionally, even in bed with Clara, she confessed, she found herself continuing to ask what she was doing there, and considered it peculiar not to say indecent, to be touching a body, having the same organs as her own. But then the next minute she would be carried away, want nothing but to make passionate love, to love her, Clara, as fully as a man; she wanted to *be* a man at that moment. Clara said it was the same for her with Ellie. It seemed absurd considering how totally female they both were, so female that a minute later their lovemaking felt to Ellie like being born and giving birth simultaneously. "Yes," said Clara severely, on her trying to explain this, "You're overstating things as usual, Ellie; all the same that's exactly what it's like." Afterwards, having stroked each other in an ecstasy of tenderness they lay laughing madly; they did not know how to stop.

When they got up they did not dress immediately. Instead they stood in front of a mirror, naked and with their arms round each other's shoulders, squinnying and tittering like a pair of teenagers, comparing their different shapes. Clara seemed so much bigger than Ellie, but Ellie was particularly thin these days, she always did lose weight when she was in love; too thin, Clara said. Ellie did not think so. She found Clara luscious, however, large as she was.

"You've such generous pubic hair, Ellie," Clara said. "I look bald besides you."

"How is it yours is so straight, Clara, when the hair on your head is so curly? And look at your legs. How long they are—they start where my hips start."

"But then I'm so much taller. Also you have such very short

legs, just like a lovely little frog," replied Clara in a fond voice. The next minute, cupping Ellie's right breast affectionately in her right hand, she said she ought to go. "Isn't it astonishing," she added reflectively, "that nipples can be such very different shapes and sizes; like men's cocks, of course, not one of them is the same; or our genitals, come to that."

This wasn't spoken at all flirtatiously or with a hint of suggestion. She sounded quite dispassionate.

A little while later she went home.

The following night, Ellie undressing before bed tried to recreate the scene. But apart from the fact no other naked hip and breast ground themselves against her own, her mood was wrong; even in the soft, quite flattering light from her bedside lamp, her flesh did not please her.

Intent on her unsatisfactory image, she failed to notice that Peter had entered the room. When he appeared behind her in the mirror she blushed and started with guilty embarrassment, while he, as querulous as a child left out of a game, said "What are you doing?" Meaning rather, she thought, why are you playing without me? She did not consider she had injured him, yet found herself blustering, "I've got thinner, I think . . . I wanted to see . . . why shouldn't . . ." Meantime she was reaching for her dressing-gown, but Peter, smiling, barred her way, his voice changing from a child's to that of an adult wheedling some other child, in this case Ellie. That voice was familiar to her too.

"Yes, you are thinner. I *had* noticed. Stand still, let me see."

He had her by the elbows from behind now, both of them stood reflected, her white flesh indecent, it seemed to her, against his dark suit. But no matter how she wriggled he would not let her go, peering at her, this way and that.

"You have lost weight, Ellie. You've no underhang on your buttocks, they're in good shape, so are your breasts . . . oh *yes*," he went on, enumerating her virtues, his voice lightening throughout. By the end of it he teased and smiled, his hands increasingly active, his buttons grinding against her back. Seen in the mirror his hand on her bare stomach looked like another hand on another body, Ellie thought; she watched with almost fascinated disgust the five-legged creature creep across her skin, feeling no connection at all between the sensation it gave her and

what she saw. But she did not move. Only when the questing fingers began to twist up her pubic hair did she start protesting once again.

"Oh come on, Ellie," he pleaded.

"No. No. Not now."

"Why not? Why not?" He was, rather desperately, teasing.

"I haven't cleaned my teeth," she said, as desperately, twisting away from him in panic, thinking of Clara.

"You can do them afterwards," he said, "*Please* do them afterwards."

"No," Ellie began shouting, "No, no," and at this, angry and disconsolate, he dropped his hands at last, letting them dangle.

"What's the matter with you these days, Ellie. What's got into you? *Why* not? Why can't we?"

"We?" she asked coldly. She saw his face turn rigid. Eventually his lips brought out, "I see. As usual. The old story."

He did not say she was frigid; it was what he meant; what she thought he meant. Dismally she turned away and reached for her nightdress, while he shouted out trying to tear it from her, "Why do you always have to wear that bloody thing?"

"Because I'm cold," she said, climbing into bed. She still had not cleaned her teeth, let alone written in her diary; she judged it safer to leave that at least until tomorrow, did not even hold it against him when he, climbing in after her, said, "What, no diary?" in a tone of some satisfaction, for what other satisfaction had she been able to give him? (Nor was he to know that the most significant sections of her diary were written, these days, at other times.) Full of guilt, suddenly, she hugged him, turning her face away. And though he took it from that that she had relented and with a murmur of pleasure put his hands to work, she did not resist, letting her mind go a long way off—she had always found it easier in the dark. Soon, however, she was longing for Clara. She felt her cheeks flush, could not stop herself groaning. Peter assumed her desire was for him.

It's obvious Peter knows something is happening. He doesn't know what. I don't think he'd suspect in a million years, for all the jokes he keeps making about my lesbian friend. He just puts Clara down as another of my short-lived enthusiasms, like the lino-cutting—that's how he always sees the things I do—and professes to be sorry

for Susie because I don't ring her any more. (Susie, it must be said, doesn't ring me either.) Meantime I can see he is suffering; yet thought I observe him sadly I'm so detached I hardly feel my pity, let alone my guilt. Mostly what he does is irritate me dreadfully. Irritation and love for Clara are the only things that seem real to me these days.

Even Ellie's children did not feel quite real to her at the moment. She thought they must notice the tension between herself and Peter, but they had a capacity she had observed at other times for becoming impervious to anything they'd rather not know about, at least on the surface. Perhaps Lucy did suck her thumb more than usual. Ellie watching her found herself for the first time making a distinction between her son and her daughter of a kind she had never made before; after all Lucy would be a woman soon. Would Lucy, she wondered, grow up to think as obsessively about her as she was thinking about her mother now?

Both children mocked her lino-cutting, just as their father did. Ellie comforted herself with thoughts of Clara's encouragement when she showed the work to her at last. But she was not ready to show it to Clara yet.

Ellie had not expected to see Clara again this week. But when on Saturday, unexpectedly, Peter went off to visit his mother, taking the children with him, her first thought was that she had been released for Clara. As soon as Peter left she picked up the telephone.

Clara did not answer, only Hannah, who merely said, "O.K." and put the 'phone down noisily, leaving Ellie to wait for what seemed a long time before she heard Clara say, "Yes? Who is it?" Ellie explained the situation with all the enthusiasm of a child let out early from school. "Isn't it marvellous?" she ended. But Clara returned coolly, "Is it?"

Taken aback, Ellie said, "But Clara, I was hoping you'd be able to come over."

"You may be free, Ellie, at a moment's notice, but that doesn't mean I am." Her tone was marginally less harsh than her words. At the end she laughed, and after a short pause, added, "You could come over here later; do you want to?"

"Peter's taken the car," Ellie said.

"Then clearly you can't," Clara said. She even sounded relieved, but Ellie obstinate, refused to acknowledge that. "I can get the train," she said, "It doesn't take long."

"Well it's up to you. When shall I expect you? After lunch?"

Normally, Ellie thought, she would have been invited to lunch. Moreover Clara's tone had been so cool, she wondered as she put the 'phone down whether to pick it up again at once and cancel the whole thing. She was forestalled by Clara ringing her to ask, as though her coming was understood, even welcome, if she would pick up some olives from the delicatessen when she was passing, to save Clara having to go out again. She added, "We'll be on our own, Hannah's gone to a concert and Edmund's taking Daniel to a football match," thereby raising Ellie's hopes for the afternoon, hopes promptly dashed when she arrived clutching a carton of black olives (or would Clara have preferred green?) to find her ensconced in her kitchen, sorting out cooking apples from a large cardboard box. Clara detached herself only long enough to let Ellie in and give her a peck on the mouth—she openly flinched from Ellie's more uninhibited embrace—before relieving her of the olives and saying, with icy politeness, "Thank you so much. Now what do I owe you?"

It was a bleak and unfriendly afternoon; the sky was thickly layered with cloud which so reduced visibility that Clara had switched on the light over her kitchen table. She herself wore a scarlet sweater above black cord jeans, but that was the only brilliant thing about her. Her eyes were opaque and dark, her face heavy; she looked positively plain. Perversely that made Ellie long for her more than ever, but she was told only that yes, she could help Clara peel the apples if she wanted, with luck she'd be better at that than she was at peeling carrots. Whereupon Clara handed her a knife and proceeded to treat every remark Ellie ventured to make as if it was a shuttlecock put up for her to knock down and out of court, despatching each as efficiently and ruthlessly as she dug brown patches out of the apples and relieved them of their skin; Ellie soon grew dismal, angry and unutterably confused.

She fell silent, wishing she had after all rung Clara to say she wouldn't come. She wanted to ask Clara's advice about the alternating images of love and death that continued to bombard

her, but to remind such a rebarbative Clara, now, of the erotic activities she was pretending did not exist, seemed unwise, not to say inappropriate. Just the same, Ellie was determined not to be frightened off entirely. Why should Clara have everything her way? She was struggling to find some dispassionate, objective way of introducing the matter when Clara raised her knife and said, "Well, have you just come here to sit and sulk, Ellie? Haven't you got anything to say for yourself?"

At once, outraged by the unfairness of this, Ellie embarked on her tale, not caring any more whether Clara liked it or not. She did try not to emphasize too strongly that the erotic obsession was with Clara's body in particular, but whether Clara appreciated this she did not know. She made no immediate response, the only effect of Ellie's words appearing to be that she changed her method of peeling apples—instead of cutting short ends of peel with angry jabs she grew more meditative and slow, let her knife spiral round the fruit until it had cut a length of peel curved like a spring. On the first apple to which she applied this process, the peel broke halfway. She embarked on the second, therefore, more slowly and carefully than ever—Ellie, falling silent, watched with bated breath to see if she could manage the whole peel this time, unbroken.

"Well," Clara said at last sighing, holding the peel up and letting it jig up and down on its own momentum like a spring. "Well?" Her success did not seem to have softened her. Her voice was as sharp as ever. "Well Ellie, what's all the fuss. Love and death have always been closely connected. Haven't you heard of Eros and Thanatos?"

"It just seems indecent in this context. Sex and my mother's coffin. I *mean*." said Ellie.

"And you don't normally, ever, have indecent thoughts? You poor little thing."

"Poor for having or not having indecent thoughts?"

"Take your pick," said Clara. "If you must wave your hands about so when you talk, Ellie, put your knife down will you, it's dangerous."

"I wasn't waving my hands about," protested Ellie.

"But you were. Why are you so prickly today? Why do you keep on contradicting me?"

"*I* do?" Ellie shouted, suddenly furious. "*I* do? *You've* knocked down everything I've said since I came in."

They were glaring at each other across the table, each with an uplifted knife. Clara dropped hers first, and her eyes also, picking up her peeled apples and slicing them methodically into the bowl of lemon juice and water that stood ready, to prevent the slices turning brown before they cooked.

The air still full of furious antagonism, she continued shooting angry glances at Ellie. Ellie, equally angry but bewildered, glared back, until Clara, pointedly, and with an effort clearly calculated to demonstrate her lack of similar control, gathered up voice and temper and said in a tone of exaggerated calm, "Well all right then, let's discuss Eros and Thanatos, if that's what you want," and proceeded to do so, with very little reference to Ellie and no erotic overtones whatever, turning the subject into academic, abstract channels (though not omitting a word or two of surprise that Ellie's mind should be so wholly occupied with such things; hadn't she more important matters to think about?) On and on she went; Ellie tried to add something once or twice, but her words were brushed aside while Clara moved from Eve and the serpent, via Schopenhauer and Tristan and Isolde to Jung and Freud. Ellie lost track of what she was saying in the end, dragged back into more literal and fleshly aspects; what had her lust for Clara, or her grief for her mother—or the sudden quite new and unexpected image she had of her grandmother's body huddled at the bottom of the stairs after her fatal fall—what did any of them have to do with Tristan and Isolde? As she knew Clara knew. *Damn* Clara. But Clara's voice had stopped now.

"You're not listening to me, Ellie," she said accusingly.

"Oh but I was."

"What was I saying then?"

"You were talking about sexual surrender as an image of death. But that's not how it seems to me."

"Yes. I've noticed you're not afraid of surrender," said Clara. Ellie, startled, drew in her breath.

"Should I be?" she asked carefully. "Are *you*?" Not looking at Clara, but out into the garden, noticing that the brightness of the chestnut leaves had grown still more hectic as the shadows deepened under the trees and the light declined by the minute.

The loud clunk from the cat door when the ginger cat leapt through, startled her unendurably. Clara ignored it. She went on.

"It's really all you want in the end, isn't it Ellie? Total surrender. Abandon. A deathly swoon from which you need never awake."

"If it is, I don't know how to reach it," Ellie said. For that indeed was the irony; in bed it was Clara who was released at last, and Ellie who, in the end, for all her pleasure, unwillingly, helplessly, stood back. Clara's eyes, very bright suddenly, and dangerous, dared her to say so. When Ellie shrugged and gave up, she rose to her feet and with irritable movements began to clear away the peel. Then she drained the apple slices and put them to cook in a large enamelled pot with brown sugar, cinnamon and lemon. Ellie meanwhile was gathering implements and chopping boards, but as she took them to the sink, Clara stepping backwards fell over her. "Oh do sit down, Ellie," she said. "You only get in the way. You and the bloody cat." This last was very vicious. The cat sat with its back to them. Ellie at last had had enough.

"I'm off, Clara. I'm going home," she declared, almost in tears, furious that she should be.

But Clara sounded merely surprised. "Already?" she asked. "You don't have to. I was just thinking we should have some tea now." Her voice seemed to soften by the word. Towards the end she turned and looked at Ellie directly, such evident pleading in her eyes that Ellie, gesturing helplessly, gave in, not with entirely good grace. In a moment they sat facing each other again across the table, before cups of lemon tea. The apples sipping and gobbling on the stove behind them made the only conversation, but gradually their spicy smell turned the atmosphere so much more kindly that when Ellie, sipping her tea very slowly and deliberately to keep herself calm, saw Clara raise a tentative eyebrow, she managed to smile back a wary smile.

Clara fished the slice of lemon from her tea, and laid it on her scallop-edged saucer. Then she said very quietly—it was apology as much as explanation—"I'm in such a strange state, Ellie at the moment; utterly confused; so battered by feeling, I can't . . . I think . . . It's inevitable, I suppose there should be

physical tension between us . . . but . . . You do understand, Ellie, don't you?"

"I suppose I do," Ellie said. "But I still wish I hadn't come."

"But you did. And maybe it was right." Clara reached across the table now and touched Ellie's hand before sitting back, her eyes still rather dark, even sad, but no longer impenetrable, while Ellie, telling herself not to be so stupid, almost wept again, this time from relief.

Into which loving scene Edmund marched, suddenly, to dump on the table an Evening Standard with a large headline saying WAR. Behind him Daniel, an ungainly boy, his voice beginning to break, proclaimed that Chelsea had actually won this week, but no one listened to him, stunned by what they read; at 2 p.m., local time, Egypt and Syria had invaded Israel on two fronts.

"And on Yom Kippur. That's wicked," said Clara in a shocked voice. Ellie wondered if such an immediate reaction surprised Clara as much as it did herself; Clara having always said she did not care about these things.

Edmund offered to drive Ellie home that day to Clara's obvious irritation. "What a very good idea," she said, "How kind of you, Edmund." Ellie tried to persuade him she could perfectly well go by train. However he would not have it, and installed her on the front seat of his Volvo which had the back down and smelt of paint, while she wondered what on earth she was going to say to him, unnecessarily as it turned out, because he grumbled all the way about the behaviour of other drivers, particularly women; she could not have got a word in edgeways. As for learner drivers he said, as they passed one, why let anyone learn to drive, weren't there enough people on the road already? If he was in charge he'd ban them altogether. She did not know whether she was supposed to take him seriously; surely she wasn't? Meanwhile she could not keep her eyes off his hands on the steering-wheel, they looked so huge there, so independent of anything except their own strength.

At the traffic lights near the crematorium a green Austin cut in front when the lights were turning red, almost hitting them. As soon as they stopped Edmund leapt out, to her astonishment, and hammered on the Austin's window, whereupon its

driver also emerged, a man in a tweed hat and a sheepskin jacket; they stood shouting at each other, went on doing so even after the lights had changed back to green and cars behind started hooting furiously. At one moment Ellie thought Edmund would actually hit the man in the sheepskin jacket. He looked more and more nervous, and suddenly scuttled back into his car. Edmund banged a hand flat on its window, so hard she was surprised he didn't break it, then got back into the Volvo and drove her home. "Bloody bastards," was all he said, before treating her to a diatribe on how the Israelis must slam the Egyptian and Syrian bastards for all they were worth; in a day or two, he said, they would.

Once again he kissed her on the mouth when he let Ellie out of the car. Then he drove off leaving her with the feeling he'd been sending her up from start to finish; that she ought not to have taken anything quite seriously, except perhaps for the argument with the man in the Austin. That was real, she thought. Was she afraid of him? Perhaps a little. She had reason to be, she supposed. What would he do if he knew that Clara and she . . . Oh God, she daren't think about that. All the same he interested her.

Clara rang up the next day. Though nothing was said about the afternoon before, she sounded so hesitant and gentle that Ellie guessed an apology was meant. She also pointed out, a little haltingly, that they had made no arrangement to meet.

"Do you want to come to lunch again?" asked Ellie awkwardly, by now as nervous as Clara sounded.

"I'd love to. That's what I'd hoped," returned Clara with patent relief.

Ellie had barely put the phone down when it rang again. The voice on the other end this time was Susie, saying rather crossly that it was the second time she'd rung, hadn't Peter told her?

"No, he hadn't," Ellie said.

"Perhaps he was embarrassed by the extreme flirtatiousness of our conversation," said Susie and laughed, shrilly, as usual. There was a brief pause and then she added, "Peter says you've got a new friend. Presumably that's why you've abandoned me." She sounded, however, more amused than abandoned,

and any guilt Ellie might have felt was superseded by her annoyance and faint embarrassment at Susie's tone of voice.

"Who says I've abandoned you? You didn't ring *me*, till yesterday," she said.

"Well I am ringing you now," Susie said. "Tell me about your new friend."

"Certainly not. It's none of your business," replied Ellie, and so they bickered on enjoyably as they always did—Ellie was never intimidated by Susie, she realised, as she was sometimes intimidated by Clara. All the same the way things were she found the whole conversation irrelevant and though they made an arrangement to meet, she rang up two days later and cancelled it. Susie did not seem to mind in the least—she had been very elusive at times herself, when engaged in a love affair.

"I can see you've much more interesting fish to fry these days, Ellie," she said. "Let me know, will you, when you return to normal life?" and they both laughed in perfect understanding —not that Susie could have guessed, Ellie thought, the precise nature of her friendship with Clara. They were bound, in any case to see each other around. It was only Peter who accused Ellie of disloyalty to an old friend, when she told him, rashly, she would not be meeting Susie, after all.

The war went on. Clearly it was not to be another six day event; the Israelis fell back on every front. In the evenings after the children's programmes, the television news showed burned-out tanks, thudding guns, huddled bodies, soldiers reeling from weariness. Lucy and Sam, bolt upright on the sagging couch, watched without comment.

Once Ellie could not resist saying to Sam, who spent much of his time arraying toy soldiers in battle formation, "Now you see what war's really about," hearing as she spoke, to her dismay, a slight hint of the hectoring triumph with which she had used to address her parents on such matters. But what was she doing using that tone to Sam, aged seven, who in any case had the measure of it, looking up at her, clutching to his mouth the old pyjama top he used as a comforter, and saying scornfully, "I know, stupid. My soldiers are just play, not real. I always know that." At this very moment there were soldiers running across the screen; some fell. Ellie, instinctively, moved to turn it off.

"No," Sam insisted, "No, leave it. I want to see what's happening. I *always* want to see." And it was true, he always did want to see and to know, not only from television. Sometimes, doggedly, he fought his way through the newspapers, looking for this report or that. Ellie wondered just how much he and Lucy absorbed of the precariousness of things. She herself had been afraid of universal holocaust ever since aged fourteen or so she had seen a headline "U.S. explodes H-Bomb."

During the Cuban crisis, she remembered, she had gone down to visit her mother on a Greenline bus, staring hungrily at every ugly street they passed, thinking there might be no streets next week, let alone people. It had been about two months after her mother became ill for the second time, three months after Ellie was married, the time they were beginning to realise she might never get better again. Just out of hospital she had sat, knitting, in someone else's sitting room, and though her clothes were totally familiar, red cardigan, pearl necklace, Ellie hardly recognised her she had been so weighted by fear and grief.

Moreover, for the first time in her life her mother had not seemed interested in her at all; she did not hear half the things Ellie said. When Ellie at one point, trying to be cheerful, declared "Isn't it all alarming? Let's hope Kruschev backs down soon," she looked up blankly and said, "Kruschev? Oh yes, of course," as if it meant nothing, as if she couldn't care a damn whether Krushchev blew them all up or not. Why should she have cared? Ellie understood that now. At the time she couldn't bear it.

A few nights later Sam had a nightmare. When Ellie went and sat on his bed to comfort him he said, so hesitantly and softly she could hardly hear, sucking away at his paisley comforter, that he kept dreaming the world was drying up. "Like in that film," he said. "Like the dinosaurs." Some weeks ago he had been taken by Susie with her son Leo, to see Fantasia. He hadn't said it frightened him then; rather, with shining eyes, he claimed it made Robin Hood look silly. Yet ever since, it seemed, he'd had visions of cracked earth, bleached bones; to make matters worse, he'd seen a television report on the drought in the South Sahara and this had confirmed his fears.

Ellie reassured him as best she could, but her reassurances

were no more exact than his alarms and a good deal less vivid. He wouldn't even let her hug him, he never did these days, to her regret, for she had always liked the simple animal aspect of mothering. It made her feel as useless—more useless—than the company of stuffed animals with which he surrounded himself each night. She picked up one of them, a fat brown bear, white-muzzled, standing on all fours, and heard herself saying—she knew it was foolish before the words were out of her mouth—"Well, Sam, he looks fat enough, he doesn't look as if he's about to die of thirst."

Sam gave her the look that this deserved; then he reached out one arm and took the bear from her, replacing it carefully among its fellows.

"I think I'd like a drink of water now," he said. But when, humbly, she returned, he set the glass on his bedside table without taking a single sip and arranged himself under the bedclothes in a very neat and orderly way.

"It's in case I'm thirsty in the night," he said. He added, frowning, "Don't you know fat people die of thirst as fast as thin ones? Mr Johnson said it only takes a few hours before you die of thirst in the desert."

"Are you still afraid?" Ellie asked, "Shall I stay a bit?"

"It doesn't matter. I feel sleepy again now." She kissed the ear which was all he left visible between blanket and animal, and was almost through the door again when he shouted out, "Don't shut the door. And can I have some hot milk, please, with cinnamon and honey?"

The Clara who came next day was quite unlike the Clara of Saturday, she was as vivacious and lively as Ellie had ever seen her. She was also exceptionally passionate. Once the startled Ellie had had time to get used to this, she, too, abandoned herself, so far as she was able.

At last Clara broke it. They had been particularly deep in one another when from the depths of the bed she screamed suddenly, "No! No!" and leapt upright, her hair springing wildly around her scarlet face, the sheets flying away from her. "No, Ellie, it's too much, I'm drowning. Stop!"

It was shocking to be cast out so suddenly from such intimate connection. Ellie went on feeling shocked even when Clara

thrust out her arm and pleaded, "I didn't mean to startle you, Ellie. Suddenly I couldn't breathe, that's all." She sat for a moment looking down at her, then subsided into the crook of the arm that Ellie offered, and they lay quietly for a while, stroking and being stroked, both gazing at the ceiling with its mouldings obscured by layers of paint. Did Clara see the same or different pictures in the cracks, Ellie was wondering when Clara said sleepily—again she startled Ellie, her mind in that other place, "Oh Ellie, this is lovely, isn't it? All the same, can you fit it in anywhere? Because I can't; not into my life, not into any sense I have of order, moral or otherwise. It just squats outside like some benign and amiable spider. Do you think it ought to be so benign and amiable?"

"Would you rather it was censorious? Do you want to feel guilty?" Ellie asked.

"No, not at all. But I do believe in virtue. And how can I be sure that what we're doing is virtuous?"

"It doesn't *feel* wicked," Ellie said.

"But that's much too black and white, not what I mean at all."

"Ah, but Clara, you're such a very superior being." Ellie spoke lightly, yet knew as soon as the words left her mouth that she did believe them; perceiving that at some level, in some wise, Clara fought her battles across a rarified territory, in which she had no desire to join her, and by which she was already beginning to sense Clara was keeping her at bay. She lay puzzling over this and in the silence grew aware of a sound that had been almost continuous since they came to bed, a chink, chink, chink, as of iron against stone.

"What's that noise outside?" asked Clara at the same moment.

"Someone working in a yard, I expect. You know there are a whole lot, backing onto our garden."

"I'll have a look." Clara kissed Ellie on the cheek, and in one swift movement was out of bed. Ellie, unprepared, felt bereft, while Clara stood by the window and surreptitiously drew back the curtain. What could Clara be watching, she wondered, the next moment she let the curtain drop and flung herself back onto Ellie, laughing.

"There's an old man working two houses along, hammering at something, that's the noise we heard; but just now, while I

was watching, an old woman in an apron opened her window above his head and emptied a dustpan over him—he's wearing a flat cap and neither of them noticed, she shut the window, and he went on working." Indeed the chink, chink, chink had not paused for an instant; which so pleased Ellie and Clara they made love again on the strength of it, this time very gently.

They were down in the kitchen before the children came home from school. Ellie switched on the lights the shocking pink wall behind the table leapt into hectic life. (Previously it had been painted a buff colour, but depressed by the effect of rather pallid elegance, she had on impulse, a few months ago, brought two cans of pink paint and repainted the wall there and then, without reference to Peter; he had been, as she expected, appalled, but not too appalled to go out the following weekend and buy more cans of the same colour because he said it needed another coat. He still grumbled occasionally or mocked her for it. At other times he would point out the colour to visitors, rather proudly as an interesting whim of Ellie's. Clara, told this story today, asked what was strange about such a colour, she could not see what the fuss was all about.)

It was Clara who suggested that Ellie brought out her family photographs. The children arrived to find books and pictures scattered across the white kitchen table alongside mugs of tea and a packet of chocolate biscuits. Clara's arm round Ellie's shoulder, they were exploring the two albums started by Ellie's grandmother for her two little daughters. ESME MARGARET: HER BOOK, announced the first page of one; ELEANOR FRANCES: HER BOOK, the other, in large, slightly crooked, slightly smudged blue letters, underneath a yellowed cutting from *The Times* announcing the birth of a daughter to Captain Edward Brooke, R.N., at 18, Canterbury Street, Chatham, Kent.

"They might have given your grandmother a name," said Clara. "Was your mother also Eleanor by the way? How confusing."

"Yes," said Ellie, absently. "That's why I was always called Ellie," gazing, meanwhile, at a photograph of her round-faced grandmother posed before a cloudy landscape against cushions of velvet and satin, holding in her arms Ellie's new-born mother

dressed in elaborate christening robes. There were several of these professional portraits, all as stiffly ordered; mother, father, two daughters, in different combinations, the babies growing into solemn little girls in lace-edged dresses and floppy hair-ribbons. The amateur photographs, though smaller and vaguer appeared much more affecting. Each carefully labelled (Mother and Ellie; Mother, Esme, Ellie; Father and Ellie; Nurse, Mother, Ellie, Mrs Stokes, so on and so forth), they had been taken on beaches or in gardens or outside some solid family house, and all of them made Ellie marvel that such attempts to hold time merely emphasized its passing. It wasn't only that the photographs had faded, that a musty smell rose up from the pages containing them. Why should her grandmother seem alive in the portrait upstairs, but in these look dead and gone? As for her mother . . . Lucy and Sam came clattering downstairs the very moment Clara turned the page of Ellie's mother's book and found the next one blank.

"What happened? Why aren't there any more pictures?" Lucy asked, throwing her coat on to the floor and pushing her hair out of her eyes. "Can I have a chocolate biscuit?"

"Just one. Otherwise you'll get fat. And you know what happened, you've seen these books often enough. My grandmother died, the one who stuck the pictures in. I've told you."

"*And* your mother was only three," Lucy began, mockingly, the familiar litany, "*And* her father was so sad he didn't want to be reminded, *and* he sold everything, even their toys and things. *And* you used to be fat as a child, so I mustn't be. *And* . . ."

"It must be horrid to have no mother," said Sam, thoughtfully, sucking the chocolate off his biscuit,

"If he got rid of all that, it's surprising he didn't get rid of this album too," remarked Clara, taking another mug of tea from Ellie and sipping it neatly. "I'd like another biscuit," she said. "Don't worry, Lucy, I'm fat already."

Sam had reached for another album.

"Who stuck these photographs in?" he asked.

"My mother, I expect, It's her writing underneath," said Ellie looking over his shoulder at Eleanor Frances again, a schoolgirl by this time, thirteen or so, round faced like her mother, spectacled, her hair cut in a fringe.

"Why does she look so cross?" asked Sam.

"She hated having her photograph taken," Ellie told him. "She always did. She thought she looked terrible in photographs."

"But she didn't, did she?" Clara said. "She looks interesting, don't you think?"

Inexorably, however, as they turned the pages of her book, the interesting schoolgirl grew up, left school, went travelling abroad. The children became bored with her after a while, and started emptying out envelopes containing photographs of Ellie as a child, scrabbling through them as frenetically as puppies in a flowerbed. Now and then one might hold a picture up amid shrieks of raucous laughter.

"Look at you with no clothes on, look, Mum, look!" whereupon the other would promptly try to snatch it, their protests noisier by the minute, until Clara said, detachedly, "This will end in tears." Ellie, sighing, set about getting their tea.

At six o'clock at Clara's request, they turned on the radio for news. The Egyptians were still pouring troops across the Suez Canal. (Clara was much more passionately concerned about the fate of the Israelis than she was, Ellie noticed.) It was during the ensuing report from Jerusalem that Peter appeared in the doorway, home much earlier than usual. If he looked flabbergasted even Ellie could not blame him. There was the table overflowing with albums and photographs, there were the children, baked bean plates pushed aside, spooning up chocolate mousse when they remembered, for they were much more interested in younger pictures of themselves, over which they groaned and grimaced, shrieking, "Weren't you *stupid*," and "Didn't I look *awful*," in ever shriller voices. And there, at the other end of the table, oblivious, were Ellie and Clara, their chairs pulled close and their heads together, Clara's arm again round Ellie's shoulder. More photographs and albums lay in front of them. The tea and biscuits had been replaced by the whisky bottle and two already almost empty glasses.

It was Clara who noticed Peter first. "Hullo," she said cheerfully. Ellie stiffened at once, but did not look up, feeling Clara's fingers continue to entwine her hair about them. By now, perhaps they were both a little drunk.

"Hallo, Clara," he answered unenthusiastically.

"Whisky, Peter?" Ellie decided she did not care what Peter

thought, putting her own hand to Clara's hand. Till now neither of the children, their backs to the door, had noticed him. As Lucy turned, surprised, her elbow caught her mug still half-full of milk and standing so perilously near to the edge of the table that it instantly toppled to the floor, taking a pile of photographs with it. Sam's lap drenched in milk, he leapt to his feet, yelling, and hit Lucy. Peter, swearing loudly, stepped forward only to fall over the cat which had entered the kitchen with him. Ellie jumped up, Sam hit Lucy again, Lucy burst into tears, Peter clutching the table shouted, "Bugger, bugger, bugger," and the cat having fled, hissing, to the far corner, cautiously returned and started lapping up the milk, thereby coming face to face with Ellie; to escape the shouts and glares she had bent to the floor and was eyeing with dismay the photographs swimming there in milk. Meanwhile the measured voice of the newsreader continued to discuss the possibilities of petrol rationing.

It was Peter who turned the radio off; who grabbed both children by the collar and hauled them apart, administering a buffet to each bottom before dispatching them through the door, yelling, "Go to your rooms now at once, both of you."

"If they murder each other, it's not my fault," he said grimly, as their shrieks could be heard fading gradually upwards. Meanwhile Clara on her hands and knees had started, efficiently, to mop up the milk. Only Ellie was still helpless. She had begun to laugh again, and could not stop; intending to gather the dishes from the table, all she could do was clutch at it and shake. She ached with laughter—every time she thought she'd succeeded in quelling them, the giggles erupted upwards from her stomach; it hurt her, far from being pleasant. Peter and Clara, alike, ignored her.

Later that evening, but not entirely before the dust had settled, Susie rang. Where had Ellie been, she wanted to know, what was she up to, why hadn't she rung? And it was true Ellie had been neglecting her, she had been neglecting all her other friends. She liked Susie very much. Yet the only friend she wanted to see these days was Clara.

It gave Peter the chance to deliver another lecture. How disloyal she was; poor Susie; they'd always used to be in each other's pockets. Had that wretched woman completely turned

Ellie's head? What happened when Clara got tired of her? Maybe Susie would have given up by that time and not want to know her either. All of which, Ellie retorted, was ludicrous; if anyone was *not* poor, in any sense, it was Susie. Also, as she pointed out to him sourly, this was one of the few times Susie had ever made contact, normally she left it to Ellie to chase her up, and why should she have to? Also, she had invited Susie to tea next week.

"I'll try and get home early then," said Peter. "I *like* Susie." (More and more obviously, he didn't like Clara. Yet in some ways she seemed to fascinate him. Why else had he kept pressing her to have another drink?)

Ellie noticed Peter leafing through the photographs of her mother later, as he was putting them away; he had been fond of Ellie's mother, and she of him. But he had also viewed her much more dispassionately than Ellie was able to. It never occurred to her, for instance, before Peter pointed it out, that any aspect of her mother's behaviour might have been called eccentric; everything her mother did seemed quite normal to Ellie. As an example of his mother-in-law's eccentricity—the story grew with each telling—Peter used to take his first meeting with her, four years before he and Ellie were married. Brought home by Ellie for lunch one hot summer Sunday, he had expected—what? A country lady in some kind of neat flowered dress? Instead, a few minutes after they arrived, there appeared at the French window, carrying a pyrex bowl full of strawberries, a woman properly made-up, admittedly, with a well-powdered nose and the bright red lipstick that she favoured, but there convention ended—for the rest she wore a pair of old army shorts rolled up to the top of her thighs, a sagging brassiere, dyed red once to look like a sun-top, now much faded and an inadequate cover for her definitely battered breasts, a linen sunhat, also faded, and a pair of scarlet sandals. "She was as good as naked," Peter used to say, "and every inch of flesh was a dark mahogany colour." In spite of which she advanced on him quite formally and correctly, inquiring how he was and proclaiming how nice it was to meet him, before she handed them the bowl of strawberries and despatched them to the kitchen.

"And that was another thing, Ellie; your mother's kitchen; how could anyone stand that pandemonium?" It had used to be pandemonium certainly, with the blue paper on its walls a little too bright to be pleasant, with its aged washing-machine, invariably at work, which in spite of being bolted to the kitchen floor, still tried frenziedly to shake itself to pieces, with the radio perched on top of an even more vintage and also talkative refrigerator, belting out Mrs Dale's Diary or the Morning Story, with several members of Ellie's family shouting to be heard, and her father, maybe, riddling out the Aga and a dog or two scratching frantically at the door. "It's surprising you aren't all deaf for life," Peter said. "No wonder, Ellie, you never hear a word I say."

Looking at the photographs, Clara pointed out how different the worlds were in which we'd grown up. Our worlds aren't so different these days though. Increasingly I'm being sucked in to her world, her household. I feel like a child again, cosseted and attended, with meals arriving as if by magic. I haven't felt so irresponsible and well-cared for since my mother died. A woman of sixty, a friend of my father's once told me how she'd met some of her old teachers, now in their eighties, and they had petted her and taken her out to lunch and said "Do take care, child." She told me how lovely it was to be called child again, and I can believe it.

A day or two later Ellie's mother-in-law came over for the evening. This was a regular event, dreaded by Peter and Ellie, looked forward to by Lucy and Sam, because she always brought them sweets and made a fuss of them. A large, once handsome woman—you could still see that she had been handsome—she was also bawdy by nature. Years ago, before Ellie and Peter were married, before Peter's father had died, Ellie had seen her at a party the Fletchers gave, much thinner then, but by no means slender, draped across the knees of a well-known barrister, a glass of gin in one hand, his tie in the other, singing raucously into his face, "Let him *go*, let him tarry, let him sink or let him swim; if he doesn't care for me than I don't care for *him*." These days, subdued by the lack of such amusements she used the gin to drown her sorrows; it made her either aggressive or maudlin or sometimes both. Peter com-

plained about it, every time she came, his voice taking on the high and querulous note that Ellie had noticed in other men when speaking of their mothers. To her face he alternately castigated, teased and wheedled; Ellie recognised, uncomfortably, the way he often treated her; in his mother's reaction she recognised, even more uncomfortably, her own.

This visit was enlivened from the start by Mrs Fletcher's driving up in her car, half-an-hour early, at the same moment that Sam arrived home from school with a badly-grazed knee. Sam did not usually make a fuss about such things, but spurred on by his grandmother's sympathy—"Oh, the poor *fellow*—oh isn't he *brave*"—he had screamed mightily while Ellie cleaned it. She had the impression he was enjoying himself very much. His grandmother, having dried his tears ostentatiously with a lace-edged handkerchief, pointed out to Ellie that she had got blood on the skirt of her green jersey suit.

Much later, after dinner, when the children had gone to bed, she started complaining tearfully that no one ever came to see her, why should they, she was just a boring old woman, the fact that she had wasted her life rearing them was her own silly fault; who cared if the level in her gin bottle went down too fast, what else was there to do in life? In the course of this she succeeded in knocking off the sitting-room mantlepiece Peter's most precious piece of china, a Worcester jug. It broke, of course, on the hearth below. Weeping more frantically than ever, she went down on hands and knees to find the pieces.

"Never mind," said Peter, cold and calm. Without seeming to brush her out of the way he actually did so, before gathering the fragments for himself.

"I'll drive you home," he said. "I don't think you're fit to."

"Oh but I can drive myself."

"I think not," he replied, raising her to her feet; she swayed against him like a lover, weeping still.

Ellie heard her own voice, very loud.

"What about her car?" she asked. "What are you going to do about that?" In a moment she was arguing with Peter. What *about* her car? If he drove her home in it, how was he going to get back? Peter told her he wouldn't come back, he'd stay the night and go straight to work from there. At once Ellie said he must come, she needed his help in the morning, she'd never get

the children up alone. She pleaded. She almost whined. She was astonished to hear herself, as well as ashamed, but once started she could not stop. It was to no avail, her mother-in-law, demurring, won the matter without difficulty, went out beside Peter looking back at Ellie, her eyes, not exactly triumphant, yet telling her she'd end up just the same way as she had, that's what happened to women, why shouldn't Ellie suffer like everybody else?

Out loud she said, "You've got very thin lately, Ellie. Anyone would think you'd found a lover."

(She always had been observant. Her first recorded comment on Ellie, to Peter, was, "That girl you brought home wearing a dirty blouse"; there had been, in fact, one grease spot on the collar.)

Next time Ellie went over to Clara's, Edmund answered the bell, to her surprise since normally he ignored bells. He had been working, judging by the stained apron he wore round him. Upstairs his open door loosed a square of light onto the gloomy landing.

"Clara's not back," he said in a level voice, looking at Ellie, unsmiling. "She's only gone shopping. She won't be long."

"I'll go and sit in the kitchen, shall I?"

"You could do, Ellie. Alternatively you could come up and see my etchings. You haven't seen them yet."

"Then can I see your etchings, Edmund," Ellie asked, annoyed to find herself disconcerted by him, as usual.

Her first impression of his room had been that it was crowded. Every surface showed an orderly disorder. Even the beams of light through the uncurtained windows pullulated with furious dust. At the far end was a carpenter's bench, underneath it fresh sawdust and shavings, on the wall behind hung an array of tools. There were huge plan chests along the other wall, a shallow sink in one corner; down the centre the room was divided by a set of shelves, one holding a variety of hands and feet of different sizes and materials, wood, china, iron, some carved, some moulded, some beautifully jointed; the most elegant and abstract of these was a pair of wooden boot stretchers, the most macabre appeared to have belonged to a real skeleton. On the shelf above stood a row of apple cores. Could

they, together with a vase of dead chrysanthemums on a window-sill, explain the slight, sweetish, rotting smell underlying the more chemical odours of the room, Ellie wondered?

Edmund, meanwhile, had been discoursing on the principles by which he worked; absorbed in looking round she did not think she had taken much note of it, yet when he set drawings in front of her, or laid small sculptures between her hands, she understood at once what she had apparently failed to hear.

"You are trying to play God, aren't you?" she asked, startled.

"Of course; any artist must; it's a matter of plugging up holes in the world."

"But God," said Ellie, "didn't just fill in holes. He was supposed to have made the whole thing."

"Yes, well. Most of us are humbler than that," he said wryly.

"What you told me before wasn't humble."

"What did I tell you?" he asked, watching her closely. Ellie fumbled for the words—it was hard having heard so imprecisely, but he gave her no help. What *had* he said exactly? That natural organisms—objects—evolve, not randomly, but according to their own potential, and according to the material which made and limited them? And that he, Edmund, wanted his work to look like that, as if given time such forms could happen in nature, or maybe even had happened already on some distant planet and were waiting to be discovered.

In some of the work he put into her hands she could feel he'd been getting near it—the shapes of metal or stone were ones she might have discovered somewhere for herself; they were even restful, which surprised her, for there was nothing restful about Edmund. Others though, moved towards something she could not grasp—they made her feel like a child or animal in a room full of objects of which it hadn't yet learned the function. She found them almost as disquieting as his hands; for again, with Edmund, her attention kept being drawn towards his hands—the way they held each artefact gave her the sense that no matter how strong or inflexible the substance from which he'd formed it—wood, iron or stone—he had only to give one wrench, like a cook at a chicken carcass, and it would fall apart. "I made you," the hands said. "Only by my permission do you remain intact." They, their wide palms, their broad fingers, seemed to contain Edmund's mind, his feelings. For a moment she even

fancied there was something wicked about them; wicked but not vicious. Or perhaps it was simply power that she saw.

Holding in what he had called her virgin hands a curvilinear construction, carved out of bone, she said very carefully, "You're not humble. Because you want to be everything; more than God; time; nature, *everything*."

"Do I?" he asked.

"Don't you? Isn't that what it would mean?"

"Is it? You tell me."

"I can't," she said gesturing helplessly, "It's all too complicated for me. I don't work like that."

"Is it so complicated?" he asked, taking the bone shape from her. In her bewilderment she was in danger of dropping it.

"I think so," she said. "It sounds simple, but it isn't."

"Oh yes it is simple, Ellie. I don't like anything that isn't. I want, I need, I *demand* everything to be simple, including my life; perhaps especially my life. I'd wipe out anything which made it otherwise. I'd wipe it out just like that."

It was not that Edmund had not been talking seriously before, or even without passion. Today Ellie hadn't felt herself teased, not entirely. Yet, suddenly, some more furious purpose had reached his look and voice which she both could and could not fathom. She dared not fathom it. Suddenly she felt completely lost. What *were* they saying? When she and Clara talked a friendly eloquence often seized and carried them; but now, with Edmund . . . where, oh where was Clara? Ellie's nose itched. Edmund's room smelt dusty.

"So what are you working on now?" she asked him agitatedly, but he only shrugged; "That's something, Ellie, I never say." The next moment Clara herself stood in the doorway, her presence powerful enough to drive away the question; she wore orange from head to foot; even her stockings were orange. She emanated energy.

"If this love-in has quite run its course," she said, her tone light, ironic, "I'd say it was time for lunch." Then she kissed Ellie lingeringly and held hands with her all the way downstairs. Meanwhile Ellie had a sudden, disconcertingly vivid memory of the first work of Edmund's she had seen, his chalk drawing of Clara. Till now she had assumed it entirely figurative; but in the light of this other work she wondered if she should look at it in a

different way, as a landscape as well as a body, a landscape that he had discovered, so that nothing, its lushness and poignancy, even its open sexuality, had existed before he formed it. Was that how Edmund saw it? Then what about Clara?

And why so many hands and feet, she wondered. They were sitting at the table now; Edmund offering her a glass of wine, Clara handing round a bowl of salad niçoise. They might both have been wooing her, competing for her attention, which was flattering of course, how could it not be, she grew higher and higher, more and more excited. Once she saw Clara eyeing her sardonically. Seeing Ellie had noticed, she smiled, then pressed on her the luscious remains at the bottom of the salad bowl; immediately Edmund offered to cut another small corner of bread to help mop the juices up.

Even later, doing the dishes, they behaved like jolly siblings, teasing and getting in each other's way. When Ellie knocked over a glass the three of them jostled, laughing, for a cloth to wipe up the water. Ellie won and as she leaned over, Edmund patted her on the haunches in full view of Clara.

"Ho, what's this?" Clara said.

"A familial gesture, what else," replied Edmund. "Isn't Ellie one of the family now, more or less?"

At this, giving her a wink, he took up his coffee cup, excused himself formally, and disappeared back to his work.

"What a sexy little thing you are," said Clara as soon as he had gone. "I heard you giggling. You'd better watch out. Edmund has been known to eat small girls."

But she was laughing. She had come very close to Ellie. She laid a hand on her breast, then, slowly and deliberately, her eyes shut, ran her tongue along her closed lips. "Ah," she sighed, "Aah. If *only*. Oh Ellie, just how sexy you are!" She stepped back abruptly, her voice suddenly brisk, "This won't do at all," she said, "It really won't."

And she proceeded to sit down at the table and ask Ellie's advice on whether she ought to redecorate her kitchen. She was always asking her advice on things like that, Ellie noticed.

It wasn't till they had discussed the matter exhaustively that she said, "Well Ellie, since you've now got some idea of Edmund's work, perhaps it's time you saw some of mine," and taking up her coffee, she proceeded to march from the kitchen

without looking back. Ellie followed, but the very minute they emerged into the hall, Edmund came down the stairs, wearing a denim jacket.

"Oh Ellie," he said, "I'm off to the garage where I do my big pieces. Do you want to come and have a look?"

"We were going to sit in my room," Clara said evenly, "I've some things I want to show Ellie, too. But it's up to Ellie, of course." And on she went, unhurriedly, leaving her to turn from one of them to the other. She would have liked to see Edmund's workshop; on the other hand she wanted still more to see Clara's drawing. Either way she could not decide without offending one or other of them.

In the end she probably offended both. She wondered afterwards if it was from here that Clara's coolness towards her began. If so it was only slight as yet. It could not have been the reason for what happened.

"Suit yourself," said Edmund, shrugging, when Ellie, hesitantly, told him she'd stay with Clara. "Another time, perhaps," and he went off, banging the front door behind him.

"Oh there you are, Ellie," said Clara politely when Ellie appeared at the door of her room. She was sitting at her desk, looking through a file of papers with an abstracted expression. "So you did decide to give me your attention after all, despite the drawing power of the great artist? Put your coffee cup down. No, not there. You'll get coffee on my papers."

The room looked as bleak as ever, as rebarbative as Clara in one of her less friendly moods. Clara went over to the filing cabinet—the mouse's skull stood on top today. She peered at it affectionately, blew dust off, and set it down.

"Well," she said, her tone a little less ironic, pulling open a drawer, "Today you'll have a full picture of the activities of Bluebeard's castle. Do you think you'll regret it as much as Bluebeard's wife?"

"Bluebeard's wife," Ellie said, "at least had some warning in advance."

"You've had warnings," said Clara, "I warn you all the time. It's not my fault if you don't take any notice."

She pulled files out of the drawer; first a grey file then a blue one. "Edmund's tax," she stated.

"Edmund's VAT." Each file had a neat label on it, edged in

red or blue, but Ellie did not have a chance to look at them before they'd been replaced, and another drawer opened.

"Letters from Edmund's London gallery," went on Clara, inexorably. "Letters from Edmund's New York gallery. Copies of letters to Edmund's New York gallery. Reviews of Edmund's exhibitions. Tell me when you've had enough, Ellie; all the files are different colours."

Ellie sat on the swivel chair at Clara's desk, and tried not to look astonished. "Do you do all Edmund's paperwork?" she asked, at last.

"Is there anything wrong in that?"

"No. Why should there be?"

"But you didn't expect it, did you? What did you think? That I spent my whole time as some kind of languishing artist? But this work needs doing, and he won't, he's no good at such things, so that leaves me; and since I'm glad to spend the money it brings in, why shouldn't I? What's more, I do it very well."

She closed one drawer with a noticeable bang and pulled open another. Drawing out a green file this time she laid it in front of Ellie.

"In return I want to see some more of your work, Ellie," she added.

"But there isn't much. You've seen most of it. Of course—" Ellie was starting at last to tell Clara about the lino-cuts, only Clara interrupted her.

"Why isn't there much, Ellie dear? You're obviously talented."

"I know but . . ."

"No buts. Are you going to look at these?" Her voice was peremptory. Almost apprehensively Ellie opened the flap of the green file and discovered inside a sheaf of papers much the same size as the other papers she'd been shown, only these weren't letters or invoices, these were drawings. Uncertainly she began to pull them out. Turning once to Clara, she found Clara's back to her, bent to yet another of the drawers.

Clara's subjects were mainly natural onces; shells, bones, leaves, branches. And if they had an affinity with Edmund's unnatural subjects, if her technique bore some resemblance to his, that could be explained by the fact that they had studied under the same teachers; Clara had told Ellie this often enough.

In any case the likeness ended there. Clara's drawings had none of the fluidity and self-confidence of Edmund's. They were disconcertingly precise, not to say obsessive and in some way Ellie could not define, bleak. Moreover, while Edmund's forms were not only savage but exuberant, hers were unyieldingly, even hypnotically sterile. (How could sterility be hypnotic? Yet these words coincided in Ellie's head.) You could not imagine her flowers reproducing themselves, or her bones and branches bearing flesh or leaves; they seemed to be burrowing ever deeper inside their own forms, compressed still further by the close-hatched lines with which she had defined them. But in a way they did not need to be able to reproduce themselves; beginning and ending with themselves they seemed so complete they satisfied her entirely. She thought they were wonderful.

At the time she found words for none of this, though she sensed Clara wanted her to speak. All she could do was reach up to the fingers that Clara was entwining in her hair and stroke them clumsily. Clara gazing at her own work did not even seem to notice. Outside the front door clicked three times at least; it must have been time for Clara's children to come home from school. Whenever Ellie heard the door she expected Clara's to open and a head to appear round it; instead footsteps went unhesitatingly upstairs, and above them other doors were opened and shut. Life in that household took place in separate rooms, she realised with envy and alarm, thinking how it did not in hers.

"Well, Ellie?" Clara asked at last.

"I think . . . they're terrifying . . . but Clara, they are good. Don't you ever show or sell them?"

"Oh yes. But not recently. I've been trying to work out something new. And now I don't want to sell them. I've drawerfuls."

"Will you show me more?"

"Sometime. Maybe. It must be getting on for teatime, Ellie. Do you want a cup before you go?"

In that way she dismissed Ellie for the moment Yet the atmosphere of her kitchen afterwards was easy and cheerful. Edmund appeared and Clara's children. Almost for the first time since she started coming to that house both Daniel and Hannah seemed to take her presence for granted. Daniel, the

noisy boy, fooled and teased and was admonished continually by his mother as usual; but he took no notice, fooled the more. Hannah, also as usual, said nothing, yet did not appear disgruntled, smiling into her tea at her brother's clowning—he was mimicking some master at his school now, who objected to the way that Daniel wore his tie. Edmund too smiled, benevolently, at Daniel, at Hannah and at Ellie, until she lost all wariness, sipping her tea from a mug. When Edmund asked suddenly what she was working at, and if he could see some of her drawings, she found herself telling him about her struggles with the lino-cuts. "Show them to me, if you like," Edmund said. "Maybe I can help." Clara made no sign. Ellie looked at her but her face was blank, and it was only later, describing the day's events in her diary in an attempt to understand what had happened, that it occurred to her to wonder if it could be this which so offended Clara. Or was it her saying that Clara's work was terrifying? Or her laughing at Daniel's jokes after Clara had told him to be quiet? Or the way, inadvertently, she caught Hannah's eye as Clara was admonishing Daniel yet again? She did not know for sure. All she did know was that she had offended Clara, for when they came to say goodbye and Edmund said politely, "We must fix a date, Clara, for Ellie to bring Peter to dinner," Clara replied, equally politely, "I'm afraid I'm very busy over the next week or two, I can't possibly make a date just yet."

"When you're ready," Ellie said. "I must go now."

In the hall she heard herself ask in a bewildered voice, "We'll see each other soon, Clara won't we?"

"Perhaps," Clara said. "Possibly." But thereafter she did not speak, and on Ellie leaning forward to kiss her, she turned her cheek and presented her with that. Ellie drove home bemusedly. Her car radio telling her that the ceasefire in the Middle East had extended to the Sinai did not seem to mean anything at all. But when she rang Clara a little while later on the excuse she had lost a glove, it was only to be told through Daniel that Clara was too busy to speak to her.

"Does it hurt?" Ellie had asked her mother once. "Does it hurt having babies?"

This was not a random question. Secretly, for months, she'd

been reading a magazine called *Nursery World* which arrived at the house each week and was full of queries from anxious readers, followed by the doctor's or nurse's replies. There was little, consequently, she did not know in theory about infant ailments, particularly those of the digestive system, or about the problems of pregnant or nursing mothers; in practice the words often floored her—she could work out the meaning of some but not of others. It did not really matter whether she understood them or not. Stools; motions; urine; nipple; colostrum; mastitis. Between fascination, shame and disgust she would repeat the words to herself like a litany, an invocation to the dangerous and forbidden gods of a wholly physical world of smells, textures and colours (curdy stools, yellow ones), of not altogether comfortable sensations, involving parts of the body she knew should not be publically discussed.

Dear Doctor, Please tell me . . . Dear Nurse, I'm so worried . . . Nipple . . . colitis . . . Push, mother, push . . .

"Does it hurt having babies?"

"Yes. Quite a lot. But you forget and it's worth it."

They were in the garden on a Sunday morning, in deck chairs, shelling peas for lunch, just Ellie and her mother; a rare moment of intimacy in that ever-present family. Everyone else had gone to church, Ellie supposed, but she could no longer remember why she had been excused; remembered only thinking "as easy as shelling peas", as she split the pods and ran her fingers down their green and satiny insides, firing the peas into the colander set in her mother's lap, in much the place from which, she imagined, tried not to imagine, her own infant head had once burst out. How was it possible? Surely the pain must . . . why didn't you split open like the peapod and die?

Her mother had worn a blue and red striped cotton skirt, a faded blue aertex shirt. Beside her on a stool stood a cup of instant coffee, a cigarette lighter and a packet of Player's cigarettes, the kind decorated with a bearded sailor's head, looking out of a life-belt. She had fixed clip-on dark glasses over her spectacles so that Ellie could not see her eyes.

"Does it go on hurting afterwards?" Ellie insisted.

"Oh no," her mother replied. "You're just very tired and happy."

"I wish I was old enough to have a baby," said Ellie, with longing.

"You'll be soon enough. All *too* soon, Ellie."

"Then you will be a grandmother, won't you?" Ellie said.

But in the end her mother had never been a grandmother, except in Ellie's mind, to the pallid china doll, the one inheritance from her mother's childhood, which she had used to wheel round the garden in a battered doll's pram, longing and longing for it to be a real baby. (Sometimes as the pram lurched over a stone and the doll's fringed eyes flew open she could almost imagine it was a real baby, until it revealed its blank glass stare.)

Their garden was a large one; a field of corn lay beyond a wooden fence. On this side of the fence was the kitchen garden, rows of beans and peas and the wire fruit cage where her mother spent much of her summer, picking strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, according to the season. Once Ellie, wheeling her pram nearby, had heard a strange sound coming from the cage, a beat simultaneously even and uneven, hard and soft, muffled and piercing, yet sending a single, desperate message; she knew the sound, she'd heard it before; a bird was shut into the cage. In a moment she caught sight of it, a female blackbird this time, with dingy brown plumage, swooping furiously hither and thither, entangling itself in the dusty mesh of the strawberry nets, or making frantic assaults on the chicken wire which caged it. Once it perched on a bush, its brown breast continuing to heave desperately, its bright eyes darting from side to side.

Ellie's first thought was to free the bird if she could, but when she went to the gate she discovered it was already open, and the next minute saw her mother creeping behind the bird along a row of raspberry canes. Taking instant flight it evaded her easily, and beat itself on the wire once more. Ellie's mother stood up and raised her arms in mock despair.

How big she looked in the little space; how inescapable. Her legs were like trees in her khaki shorts, her face had turned red with heat and effort. When Ellie called out to offer help, she hesitated—the bird, she said, did not know what it was doing, was liable to engage its claws with anything.

It must have taken them twenty minutes at least. Time and

again they edged forward, one on either side, their arms outstretched, driving the bird before them towards the gate. Time and again it spurned the free air waiting it and swerved away, inside.

"Anyone would think it didn't want to escape," said Ellie disgustedly.

The bird came very close to Ellie, then; she could distinguish the feathers on its wings, its scaly legs, its excessive claws, before it flew off, avoiding her. Scarcely daring to breathe she crouched behind and this time, at last, it found nothing to bar its way and soared straight out of the door, leaving Ellie with an equal sense of loss and ecstasy—how easily it flew, though still near the ground. To bar its return she reached out and latched the wooden gate. Inside the cage, together, she and her mother, laughing rapturously, embraced.

It is two days since I saw Clara and she hasn't rung. I'm beginning to get frantic. I cannot work. I can hardly think of anything else.

By the third day when Clara still had not telephoned Ellie, she told herself, firmly to pull herself together. She cleared up the kitchen, emptied the rubbish bin (across its lid Peter had written in red paint, WHEN THIS IS FULL, EMPTY IT) even washed the floor. Then she set out her lino-cutting tools on the table top, and congratulating herself on her coolness, her escape from obsession, she began to cut a new design. But it did not go well. She gouged lines where there should be none, wasted several squares of lino in that way. Nor did her attempts at improving and reprinting earlier designs please her any better. Minute by minute she grew uneasier. She was reluctant to leave the house in case Clara should happen to ring, though knowing perfectly well that if Clara did and got no reply she would ring again later. Of course she could have rung Clara. But she decided that nothing would induce her to. It was the certainty of that which forced her into admitting that something had gone badly wrong.

Edgy and dejected, she snapped at the children, rebuffed Peter's solicitous inquiries, grew still more dejected and afterwards, ashamed of herself, watched them form an alliance against her. (Mum's in a temper . . . your mother . . . and so

forth.) But how could she blame them? For the next day or so she and Peter scarcely exchanged a word except on practical matters.

On Friday that same week, Ellie heard on the six o'clock news that the miners had turned down their pay offer and were imposing an overtime ban; oh God, she thought, there'll be a strike next; we'll get rota cuts and all that stuff, just like last year; that's all I bloody need. Shortly afterwards, on impulse, overturning her firm decision not to ring Clara on any account, she went to the telephone and, trembling, lifted the receiver from its hook.

Edmund answered, very curt. Oh, hullo, Ellie, no, he did not know if Clara was in. There followed a long silence. Ellie tried to calm her increasing agitation by reading the diary hung on a hook beside the 'phone, but since in every column it said, lunch with Clara, meet Clara 11 a.m., 'phone Clara 6 p.m., and so on, it did not help at all. After a while she became convinced that Clara was deliberatedly keeping her waiting; that in the end she would not speak to her, Edmund would come back and make some obvious excuse. She grew angrier and angrier; by the time she heard the receiver picked up at the other end had no doubt she'd hear Edmund's voice again. Instead, to her surprise, Clara said coldly, "Yes, Ellie?"

"Hullo," Ellie said, her own voice no warmer. Afterwards there was silence, in which both Ellie's anger and certainty leaked painfully away. At last, trying, in vain, to keep the anxiety out of her voice, she said, "I was wondering how you were, Clara?"

"All right, of course. Is there any reason why I shouldn't be?"

"OK then, Clara, I won't bother to ask."

"If you've just rung in order to be abusive, Ellie, I'm going to ring off."

"Clara, what *is* the matter?"

"Why should anything be the matter?" None the less the tone of Clara's voice confirmed Ellie's suspicions.

"Something is, Clara."

"If you say so."

"When will we see each other?"

"Sometime. Perhaps."

"Clara." Ellie, babbling with shock and anxiety, irritated at

making her feelings so plain, fumbled for a way of breaching this impenetrable wall. "Clara, I'm running out of everything, I need to go to the Cash and Carry. You did say you might come with me. I thought maybe Monday or Tuesday . . ."

"Well that's up to you. I don't think I need anything."

"Clara, tell me, please, what is the matter."

"On second thoughts I'm running out of rice. They do have rice?" Clara's voice had grown colder if anything. "It'll have to be a quick trip. I'm very busy at the moment."

They arranged to go the following Wednesday. Clara said she could not manage anything sooner than that. A week ago the notion of going ten whole days without seeing her, would have devastated Ellie, but now she was relieved and pleased that they would meet at all. Even so, she spent the whole of that weekend and the two days after it convinced every time she heard the telephone that it was Clara ringing to cancel the arrangement. She could settle to nothing; she picked things up and put them down; when she embarked on a usually effective therapy, baking, the biscuits burned, the cakes did not rise. Peter mimed not being able to get his teeth into them. "Your mother's taken to making lead cake," he said to the children. All three groaned and clutched their stomachs, Sam and Lucy giggling uncontrollably, while Ellie threw her efforts into the waste bin and stamped away upstairs, too agitated and angry to weep. Peter, placatory, followed her a little later, but because she would not be placated, he went away offended and hurt.

At two o'clock on Wednesday, as arranged, she picked up Clara outside a tube station, and having trembled all morning, found herself, the deed accomplished, cool with relief.

Clara did not kiss her, nor ask how she was. Instead she said, after a silence, "Well it looks as if we're in for a cold winter, what with no oil and now no coal."

"You mean the miners?"

"What else could I mean? I dare say they'll have to ration petrol soon."

"Heath said there wouldn't be rationing last week."

"But that was before the miners' ban on overtime," insisted Clara, "There mightn't be petrol for trips like this in a little while. That's why I decided to come today." They were sitting at a traffic light; she looked hard at Ellie as if daring her to deny

it. Ellie staring back to prove she was not intimidated, did not realise the lights had changed till cars started hooting from behind.

A short while later, wheeling her trolley along the concrete aisles that ran between the steel shelves of the warehouse, she concluded, gloomily, that what she was suffering from was the pains of love. Clara appeared to have been suffering too, though she had not admitted it. Since their conversation in the car they had hardly exchanged one word. Ellie, moreover, intimidated by the sight of such vast quantities of goods, vats of coffee, barrels of flour, huge boxes of soup and vegetables and cat food, did not want to buy anything; all she wanted was to go home. Clara meanwhile had been filling up her trolley. Giving a sudden pleased exclamation she dragged a large carton from a bottom shelf.

"Barbados sugar," she said. "That's wonderful value, Ellie. Why don't you have one?"

"We'd never get through so much of it," Ellie protested. "Besides Sam and Lucy hate dark sugar, and I don't think Peter likes it much."

"Then you should educate them," said Clara, briskly, "It's far healthier than the other kind and they'll get used to it."

Ellie doubted this. But not wishing to let the conversation remain buried there, she took a carton, reluctantly, and heard herself asking in a conversational tone, leaning on the handle of her trolley,

"What did I do to upset you, Clara?"

Clara, gazing into the distance, past a stack of catering-sized drums of desiccated soup, replied, her voice small and remote, "You don't know, Ellie? Perhaps I expected far too much of you. I need to think highly of my friends."

"It was telling Edmund about my lino-cuts, wasn't it?" persisted Ellie.

Clara pushed her load away firmly. "I want rice," she said, "I'll see you round the corner."

When they met again she nodded at Ellie's still sparsely filled trolley. "Is that all you're getting?" she asked, "It hardly seems worth coming here for that." Then not altering the tone of her voice, only its intensity—they were contemplating a variety of spaghetti shapes—bows—ribbons—shells, contained in trans-

parent plastic sacks—she said, or rather hissed, with a fury so sudden and malevolent it made Ellie tremble, "Why should I care a damn what you say to Edmund?"

So that *was* it, Ellie thought. Watching Clara's fierce selection of a bag of spaghetti shells, she settled for one of bows and dumped them in her trolley, then pulled it on, saying over her shoulder, both anger and pleading in her voice, "I tried to tell you earlier, but you interrupted me. It meant nothing telling Edmund, it just came out, that's all. How should I know you'd mind so much? Whatever does it matter?"

"If you love me you should have known." Clara sounded almost fretful.

"Well I didn't," said Ellie irritably, her nose itching from the large drums of detergent they were passing. "And anyway I'd much rather show them to you than Edmund. All I want is advice. I'd like *your* advice, Clara."

"It's good to know," said Clara, "that you value my opinion so highly. But I would have thought Edmund's would have been of more interest to you, considering his eminence."

There was a mixture of satire and pain in the emphasis she laid on the last word. Ellie could scarcely believe her ears. (She did not like to tell Clara that before they'd met she'd never heard of Edmund.)

"But Clara," she said, "you're my friend, not Edmund."

"Ellie can you really be that ingenuous, or think that I am?" Clara asked.

"Yes," Ellie heard herself shouting, "Yes, I can. You've put me through all this, Clara, for . . . If I don't know you well enough, you certainly don't know me."

"I suppose I don't," said Clara coolly.

About this time there came a loud crash of glass, and when they turned the next corner they found gherkins rolling everywhere like little green molluscs amid pools of liquid and the fragments of the jar. It was as Clara said, laughing, a difficult setting in which to maintain a high emotional drama; this did not stop her accusing Ellie a moment later of naiveté for not recognising that she might be touchy, professionally, about Edmund. In the next breath she wailed how degrading it was, how appalling, to let herself be tortured by anything so stupid, she was beginning to wonder if she was strong enough morally

to cope with the situation between them. Then she burst out laughing again and told Ellie not to look so stricken, it wasn't the place for it; in a hidden place behind a stack of boxes she even kissed her. For the rest of the afternoon like convalescents delicately testing out ordinary life, they were gently flirtatious, touching by accidental intention and finding wonderfully amusing all kinds of unlikely things, from the bursts of jolly music out of loudspeakers in the roof to the black painted fingernails of the woman on the checkout, and the way she passed on each of their monstrous packages, intoning, "*Next* please, next . . ."

Peter's attitude to the sugar that evening was derisory, just as Ellie would have expected.

Ellie's friend Susie came to tea next day. Apart from being more inquisitive than ever about Ellie's new friendship, she related some lengthy saga about trouble in Lucy's class at school, caused by a certain group of girls. Ellie had not thought much about it, since it did not seem to affect Lucy—if she sucked her thumb a lot she always had done that; but a few days later, the first morning after half-term, Lucy refused to go back to school, and though Ellie and Peter persuaded her she must, she continued to make a fuss all week. One morning she even convinced Ellie she was ill, an hour later she clearly wasn't. Ellie, urged on by Peter, went to see her teacher the following afternoon. A languid young man, he said yes, he did think Lucy was having difficulties; there were three other girls who seemed to have ganged up on her, and, yes, he was keeping an eye on the situation; but Ellie must realise that interference sometimes exacerbated matters, rather than relieving them; he was sure this would ease off in due course, and if not and only then would he try another tack.

"And so meantime we just let Lucy suffer?" asked Ellie angrily. The teacher looked at her in weary pity and made no reply.

Next day again, Lucy left for school in tears, still refusing to explain anything even to Peter with whom she was normally open, though he had tried his best, bringing home small presents, sitting on her bed at night; one evening he had taken her into the bath with him. Wounded as well as worried, he turned on Ellie.

"How could you not have noticed sooner? You're so wrapped up in yourself, these days, that's the trouble."

Ellie's renewed attempts to comfort Lucy that evening merely made her hysterical. The following day she left home tight-lipped and without demur, returning at four o'clock very pale and wearing an air of subdued triumph. When Peter later tried to be solicitous, not realising the situation had changed, she made a face at him and left the room.

Peter poured himself a large whisky.

"Our children seem to have no manners whatever," he complained.

"You shouldn't take it so personally," Ellie said, touching his cheek in passing.

"It's all very well for you, Ellie, you don't care," he said.

"Oh yes I do. But I don't let them hurt me. They're only children."

"*Your* children."

"And yours," she said.

Next morning, Halloween, Lucy had regained her usual colour and appeared very cheerful.

"I'm going to trick and treat this evening with Joanna," she said.

Ellie stared at her. "I thought, wasn't it Joanna . . ."

"Oh yes," said Lucy coolly, spreading honey on her toast. "Oh yes, but I dealt with it." And that was all she said. When Peter attempted to question her further, she gave him a small, rather impertinent smile, kissed him fondly and left for school, before Sam had even finished his breakfast.

That evening when the children came in from school, they dived into the dressing-up box, releasing the unmistakable musty smell that was already ancient in Ellie's childhood. Then having draped themselves in ragged lace and silk, wearing pointed hats they had made at school, they went out to pester the neighbours, leaving Ellie to be dragged to her own doorstep by other nice middle-class children in motley array, all giggling uncontrollably.

"Trick or Treat?" It seemed strange that the game was catching on here. She had never heard of it till the last two years, except in American books. Fetching biscuits and sweets, she wondered what would happen if she said Trick instead of Treat.

Would they dare do anything terrible? Yet she was sure they did not expect to have to—how trusting they were—was it wise of her to keep conniving at their trust?

Once, on opening the door, she found a single child there, wearing black poncho and tights, its face disguised by a white, luminous disk. Rather than shrieking or giggling like the rest it was blowing a thin high whistle through a hole cut for a mouth, went on whistling while Ellie gaped at it, until she pulled herself together sufficiently to thrust a biscuit into its black-gloved hand. At once the mask was snatched off and she found herself confronting the wholesome, grinning countenance of Susie's eldest daughter, Emma.

"Don't you think it's good?" she asked. "The mask's a paper plate with holes cut in it, and the whistle is a dog whistle."

"You'd better be careful," Ellie told her, "It's so good it might frighten someone."

"But it's only me underneath, really," said Emma.

"All the same it makes me wonder who you are," Ellie said. Emma looked puzzled.

"It works all right," she protested, "I've had lots of treats," bringing out from behind her back a plastic carrier into which the biscuit vanished. And at this, settling the plate back on her face, she became an apparition again, Emma yet not Emma, for all her protestations, into the hand of which Ellie pressed another chocolate digestive biscuit before it disappeared into the night.

This was the evening Ellie and Peter were going to dinner with Clara and Edmund. As usual of course they were late in leaving. The children stayed out far longer than they should, moreover the fog when they reached the river had thickened considerably. Peter grumbled, mildly, but it was Ellie this evening who was edgy and agitated, begging him to drive faster, they were going to be late, while Peter pointed out reasonably enough that it wasn't he who'd kept them waiting.

When they did arrive they found to Ellie's surprise that Clara had invited some other people, though she had told Ellie she would not. They did not seem a likely couple as friends for Edmund and Clara; Vanessa, the wife wore shiny pink lipstick, shiny brown vinyl boots and a limp brown dress with its hem

cut in uneven points, and talked very fast in a Kensington accent about her children. Trevor, the husband, hailed from South London judging by his voice (it was with irritation that Ellie noted herself making these distinctions but she could not help it, her parents had conditioned her that way). A small neat man in a three-piece suit, a black shirt and a wide, white tie, he reminded her of the squirrel that had sat outside her kitchen window that morning nibbling busily, its brown eyes shifting from this point to that. He ran an art gallery somewhere, successfully enough, Clara said. ("He does a line in discreet rural pornography, that's the only way I can describe it," she told Ellie in the kitchen. "Cunts in stones and cocks in running brooks; you know the sort of thing. It makes him a lot of money. He gave Edmund an exhibition once years and years ago.") Apart from this Ellie could not imagine why they had been invited—she assumed Clara must be doing her duty by them, as in some respects she was doing her duty by Peter, if not Ellie.

Alternatively she had invited them as audience, or more nearly, as the equivalent of witnesses to watch Edmund and Clara lay claim to Ellie. For it was hard to tell this evening which of them was the more proprietorial. Edmund set hands on her at every opportunity, while Clara not only threw her frequent meaningful glances, but now at dinner, having defied convention by setting Ellie beside her, was pressing her knee underneath the table. Surely everyone must notice? But of course they were meant to, thought Ellie, at one level resentful, on another flattered, on a third guilty because Peter was looking ever more baffled and unhappy, at a fourth uncaring, indeed reckless, floating higher and higher, watching Edmund pour wine into her glass with a glazed attention which excluded everything but its red flicker and bubble.

Outside, as if it was Guy Fawkes night instead of Halloween, someone had let off a firework. Only a few trailing sparks penetrated the fog beyond the window but they were all momentarily startled. Next time Edmund took the wine bottle round, Ellie sobered, put a hand over her glass and gave Peter a reassuring smile which he ignored. Clara now began to pay him lively attention. Vanessa was entertaining Edmund with a spirited and detailed account of her latest confinement, while Ellie, seeing herself eyed by Trevor, tried to think of something

to say to him but failed because Clara was running a finger along the inside of her thigh, declaring, animatedly, as she did so, "I know very little, Peter, about what motivates people in *your* world."

By this time they had almost finished their main course—spiced lamb and stir-fried vegetables. Like all Clara's food it was both good and adventurous, yet as practical in effect as her table, set without flowers and candles. Afterwards Clara produced an apple cake, made by her au-pair girl, and the conversation turned general, progressing via the Middle-Eastern war, the possibility of petrol rationing and of large-scale strikes and fuel shortages, to the dangers of a wider war in future.

"Wait till the Arabs have the bomb," said Trevor cheerfully. "That could be the end of all of us."

"Unless we can get the buggers first," said Edmund.

"Armageddon, I suppose," Clara said, "Will you have some cream, Trevor?"

Edmund, leaning over Ellie, poured wine into her glass before she could stop him, gently ruffling her hair. (Ellie saw Peter watching them, but she did not know if she cared any more; or rather there was no point in caring; she was being sucked into something over which she had no control nor wanted any.)

"How about apocalypse then, Ellie?" Edmund asked, "I was brought up on apocalypse. We'll all be consumed by fire if not eaten by dragons of wrath, if not ridden away behind some pale rider or other."

Ellie replied tartly that apocalypse didn't appeal to her at all; and that in any case nuclear holocaust had little to do with the Book of Revelations, and as far as the bomb was concerned, she didn't want to know anything; if one was dropped she'd rather be slap in the middle of it and die immediately.

"How very heroic," said Clara, squeezing her knee again.

"Not at all; I just don't want the skin burned off my back; I don't want to die slowly of radiation sickness," she returned.

Peter said they were all being much too pessimistic, he didn't seriously think it would ever happen. Trevor said on the contrary, he was sure it would, in the meantime let's eat, drink and be merry, and in any case he'd an idea he could wangle it so

as to be out of the way in time. Vanessa asked why they had to have this discussion at all; surely it would be better to forget the horrible affair; what about their children for goodness sake? To which Clara replied, quite, what about their children? For their sakes they must discuss these things. Only when people realised that such a possibility seriously existed would they set about trying to put a stop to it.

At this point Vanessa surprised them. "I tell you what I would do," she shrieked—and turned scarlet at once, obviously abashed by the power of her own voice, yet continued undeterred. "I'd *kill* my children first. I've got sleeping pills, I'd give them those. I wouldn't let them suffer."

"Vanessa, sweetie," protested Trevor. Edmund and Clara exchanged ironic looks. Peter glanced round the company in general. Ellie, however, found herself viewing Vanessa for the first time with sympathy and even admiration. There was only a shadow left of the shiny pink lipstick. Her eyes glared open. As she raised her arms to emphasize the point, bangles gleamed upon her wrist like armour.

"Vanessa, you look like a tigress defending her cubs," said Clara with a kind smile.

"I *am* a tigress," replied Vanessa, grimly. In that moment it did not seem absurd. When no one else spoke, when they kept on looking at her, she added, only a little less fiercely, that in her view the worst thing about such total destruction was the thought of nothing coming after.

"At least if you just die," she said, or rather, shouted, her voice still out of her control, "even if you die young you know the world will go on after you; you leave your children in it."

"You see Vanessa's *very* keen on sons and heirs," murmured Trevor, in smug derision. Oh, the bastard, Ellie thought. She knew at once what Vanessa meant—she too felt the greater terror at the prospect of a void.

But if Vanessa know how to defend her children, she did not know how to defend herself. She gave Trevor an anguished look and immediately subsided. To Ellie's surprise and gratitude Peter came to her rescue before Ellie could open her mouth, telling Clara, loudly, how delicious her dinner had been. Clara thanked him politely and rose to her feet to make

some coffee, setting the kettle to boil, putting cups on the table, and alongside them, disasterously for Peter, a bowl of the Barbados sugar she had bought from the cash-and-carry.

Yet it was Peter, after all, who started it. Presumably he'd been getting his own back on Ellie. She had behaved very badly all evening, or at least she had behaved oddly. No doubt she'd been a little drunk, flirting with Clara and Edmund simultaneously as they were flirting with her. To him, on the other hand, she must have appeared unassailable. She had, deliberately, avoided his every glance. My fault, she could remember thinking quite clearly in the middle of it all—but that was the only clear thought she had the whole evening, her thoughts otherwise as formless as the fog outside the window which might roll in any moment and stifle the whole lot of them. At some point, staring into it, Ellie lost track entirely—did not realise that the sounds coming at her made up her own name.

"Ellie. *Ellie.* Do you want your coffee black or white?" (Clara.)

"Wake *up*, Ellie, how do you want your coffee?" (Peter.)

"Ellie. Ellie. Ellie. Ellie." (All of them, it seemed.)

Startled, flinging out a hand, she knocked over a wine-glass—at this Peter's irritation broke its bounds, he accused her, loudly, of clumsiness, not to say bad manners—Edmund, meanwhile, leapt up to find a cloth, but not before Trevor had pulled out a white handkerchief and mopped efficiently as well as ostentatiously. "Chivalry is my second name," he proclaimed to the company at large, flourishing his wine-stained handkerchief.

"Ellie, you silly bitch, you must be drunk," Peter was saying loudly. *He* must be, she thought. Peter didn't usually attack her, directly, in public.

Meanwhile Trevor and Vanessa watched, smirking identically. Clara frowned and went on making the coffee. Edmund eyed Peter with dispassionate interest, while Ellie looked everywhere wildly, a fixed smile on her face.

Putting a spoonful of Barbados sugar in his coffee, Peter turned to Edmund and said, "Ah, I see, a fellow-sufferer."

"In what way?" asked Edmund, mildly, looking over his spectacles.

"The perils of the cash-and-carry. The siege by porridge oats and bog roll; the onslaught of sugar so powerful it . . ."

Now Ellie trembled for him. Or maybe she did not.

"Would you rather have white sugar in your coffee?" inquired Clara, dangerously.

"No thank you, this will do. I'm sure you're quite sensible about the whole thing, Clara, but Ellie . . . She's bought twenty pounds of solidified molasses which none of us even likes; which this time next year will be sitting untouched in the cupboard alongside the twenty pounds of lentils she bought last year. We don't like those either. What can you do with twenty pounds of molasses sugar? Do you have any idea, Clara?"

Edmund said. "Peter, my dear fellow; do you know how to make treacle toffee?"

Peter cut off in full spate, looked taken aback.

"Of course not. Should I?" he asked.

"You don't? Then let me solve your problem," replied Edmund, rising to his feet. He unhooked Clara's apron from its peg and tied it round himself, lifted from the bottom of her store cupboard a familiar-looking cardboard carton; fetched butter out of the fridge and black treacle off an upper shelf on which he also sought something, vainly, while the rest of them watched in silent amazement.

"Cream of Tartar; where's the cream of tartar," he was muttering impatiently. Clara rose, and from the very place he stared at, produced a small white drum and handed it to him.

"Any more coffee anyone?" she asked, holding out the coffee pot and smiling as if nothing was untoward.

Edmund was drunk, wasn't he? Ellie couldn't be certain, for all his desperate sobriety, as of a man liable to fall any minute if he did not watch his step. (But then, at the moment, she couldn't be certain of anything. It felt like seeing beneath her hands a collection of unrelated beads, which she juggled with frantically, trying to make a pattern.)

The dark sugar was bubbling in the saucepan by now, sending out a marvellously bitter yet unfathomable smell. Her children loved treacle toffee, Vanessa repeated noisily, several times, while her husband, lips slightly parted, darted amused and inquisitive glances this way and that, from one person to another; he might have been hoarding them for his future

entertainment. Clara, Ellie could not make out at all; on several occasions she caught her throwing Edmund glances of astonishing complacency, at the same time she seemed to be trying to make things easier for Peter, passing him polite and equable remarks about unrelated matters, in between Edmund's instructions on making treacle toffee. As for Peter himself; Ellie had never seen him so uncomfortable. He kept giving little laughs, cutting them off in the middle. Sometimes he threw her looks of fury and pleading, to which, suspended between pity, indifference and a hysterical desire to laugh, she could only return niggardly smiles. Placatory, even slavish smiles, Clara called them next morning, over the telephone. "How could you Ellie? After he'd gone for you like that in *public*?" Too late Ellie wanted to ask her how she could have behaved as blatantly, as Edmund's acolyte; because so she had, and Ellie had not admired it, any more than she had admired herself. Any more than she had been able, even grudgingly, to admire Peter, though he had challenged Edmund at last, bravely, on his own ground, by making a joke of it.

Edmund was either too drunk or too clever to fall for that; he brought Peter a small saucer of water into which he'd dropped a globule of his mixture, instructing him solemnly to look at it with care, because the toffee was not ready yet and that would help him to tell this in future. It had to get much harder, he said. For toffee you had to ignore the soft ball stage, on the other hand you shouldn't let it go too far, you didn't want soft crack either, let alone hard crack, heaven help Peter if he let it reach hard crack, he'd never shift it with a hammer; hard crack was the wrath of God. What Peter wanted, he said earnestly, was hard balls; definitely hard balls. Not a witty statement, taken literally or not, but it was the end of Ellie, she burst out laughing uncontrollably, did not know how to stop.

Vanessa and Trevor left before Ellie and Peter, holding hands ostentatiously. Peter had wanted to leave too, but Edmund would not let them. Oh no, he said, they must wait for the toffee to cool. (Why oh why didn't Peter shout, Bugger the toffee? Ellie wondered after. Why didn't I, come to that? But neither of them had.) Of course once they reached their car, clutching a plastic bag full of toffee slabs, Peter let rip—Ellie did not blame him.

"Those dreadful people," he said. "I don't care how good or famous a sculptor he is, he's a shit; a poseur; an ill-mannered bastard."

"Well you shouldn't have gone on about me like that. He was only trying to stop you."

"I will go on and on; until you stop behaving so stupidly. Clara this and Clara that. Clara says, Clara thinks . . . How can you let them fool you, Ellie? She's playing with you, they're both playing with you, can't you see that? I bet it's not the first time. I've bet they've had some other silly innocent in their clutches before now. What happens when they get tired of you? Because they will, you'll see."

"You're just jealous," Ellie said angrily. "I don't believe it for one moment."

"Never mind. You'll see I'm right. She's some kind of closet lesbian, I'm sure, and he connives at it, probably it gives him some kind of kick. And as for you, giggling and simpering at them all evening . . . You ought to be ashamed, Ellie."

"I was not giggling and simpering. Shut up. *Shut* up," protested Ellie, vehemently, because she was afraid that might be true. (The worst of it had been, the whole evening, that she had not known whose side she was on.)

I have a bad taste in my mouth this morning. I feel rather guilty and afraid. One minute I almost wish I had never met Clara, the next I think I would die without her. It goes on and on. AND ON.

At tea that day, Lucy said, inserting her spoon into the yolk of her especially hard-boiled egg, "Last night, Mum, I dreamed you were a witch."

"A white one or a black one?" asked Ellie smiling.

"How can a witch be white?" protested Lucy.

"If her magic's good, she's a white witch," Ellie said.

"But you were dressed in black. You were definitely a wicked witch," Lucy was giggling.

"Oh well, you had a nightmare then. Did I frighten you?"

"Yes. But it wasn't a real nightmare." Having scraped out her egg, Lucy turned the shell upside-down and smashed the end in with her spoon. "There, anyway, if you are a witch, I've smashed your boat—you'll drown. Can I have an apple now?"

Part Two

Ellie had met Peter at Oxford during her second term. Peter in his last term had been working so conscientiously for his schools that he would never come out to see her till ten o'clock at night. Sometimes they went to a pub, more often, the weather that summer being perfect, they climbed over a gate and walked in the university parks. They did this every night for three weeks, yet did not touch each other. Ellie used to the immediate sweaty embraces of previous young men was surprised, but not unduly concerned, smiling demurely when her friends made snide comments about her disappearing each night "to snog in the park with Fletcher." Of course it didn't mean they had not flirted. Moreover the flirtation drew out of Ellie a wholly new persona—she became, for instance—there was no other word for it—skittish. Once walking home with Peter she had been so exhilarated she leapt up to an overhanging branch, snatched a young beech leaf and ate it. Since Peter, interpreting impulse as charming habit called her thereafter "my leaf-eater" she felt obliged to keep on charming him by eating leaves all summer. Looking back later she thought she must have been crazy.

(The fact she was not really a leaf-eater, nor a lot of the other things he imagined her to be at the beginning, and that she tried to pretend she was had become, in due course, a source of complaint. At times Peter implied she had cheated him; he was joking, of course.)

At last, one night, she wrote in her diary: "He kissed me! HE KISSED ME!!!" For so he had, and so he continued, though claiming years later that he had been astonished at first, even alarmed, by the passion in her kisses. Ellie wished she could find that passion for him now.

It was then, one Sunday, when his exams were over, that they had borrowed a car and driven over to have lunch with Ellie's parents. On their way back to Oxford Peter asked Ellie if her mother was always so desperate.

"Whatever do you mean?" returned Ellie. Her mother had seemed much as usual to her.

"She was desperate about everything, didn't you notice? About the food, about meeting me; even about who was going to do the washing-up. Doesn't she ever relax?"

He had gone on using such terms of Ellie's mother as long as he had known her, yet there had, that Sunday, been some reason for her strain; unknown to Ellie, her sister Janetta's marriage was breaking up. Ellie's mother seemed to take this worse than Janetta herself, who insisted she preferred her independence and should never have got married in the first place. Though the sisters were not at all alike, Ellie understood better than her mother what Janetta meant. (On the other hand, to judge from her subsequent jealousy of Ellie's marriage and children, things were not quite so simple for Janetta as she made out.)

It was later the same summer, while Ellie was working as an au-pair in Cumberland, that her father had rung to say her mother had been taken into hospital at very short notice and had her right breast removed. It was only a small tumour, her father assured her. They'd caught it early, she was almost sure to be all right.

Ellie, after the first shock, did not know what to think. Peter tried his best to reassure her. One of his mother's closest friends had had the same operation twenty years before, he said, and she was still flourishing. In Ellie's mother's case, it was four years, almost exactly, before she fell ill again.

They were in November now, the month Ellie disliked most of all, with the possible exception of February. And it was during November that everything semed to fall apart by processes which appeared inexorable afterwards, though they were hard to define at the time. Indeed, Ellie hardly knew things were falling apart, until they had. The oil crisis deepened, the miners and electricians continued banning overtime, there were queues at petrol stations, the declaration of a State of Emergency, one damn thing after another. As for her and Clara—whatever happened?—Ellie hardly knew, either then or later, only that the three meetings she had with Clara over the first three weeks left her unutterably confused.

At the beginning of November all the leaves fell off the trees, and Clara came to lunch with Ellie. They had both been looking forward to it; what with this and that, half term, their estrangement, they had not had lunch at Ellie's for weeks, or so it seemed; which meant they had not been to bed either; and though it was not said directly, it had certainly been hinted at by both of them that they were hungry for it, that this was the main reason for Ellie's invitation and Clara's acceptance of it.

Perhaps Ellie was too hungry; perhaps she hoped too much from it, as healer of their differences; perhaps Clara knew that and feared it. At any rate, she appeared looking pale and tense, wearing the first garment Ellie had ever seen on her that she actually disliked—indeed would have called ugly—a brown tweed skirt with large green and scarlet flecks in it and a waistcoat to match, over a brown polo-neck sweater too high in the neck to suit her and not quite the right shade of brown. Moreover, instead of their going to bed immediately as Ellie had hoped, Clara had marched downstairs to the kitchen, commented on its disorder—Ellie, distracted by desire had got behindhand, and in any case Clara was early—and resolutely refused a glass of the wine that had been cooling in the fridge.

She eased a little over lunch. But afterwards—Ellie had been beginning to look at her more hopefully—she asked sharply: "What's the matter, Ellie. Why are you looking at me like that? What are you suggesting we should do?"

"You know perfectly well," Ellie replied equally sharply, whereupon Clara had inquired if such things were obligatory, and when Ellie did not answer, accused her relentlessly—she was driven Ellie could tell, but she did not know how to stop her—of sitting there seething, little sex-bomb that she was.

"It isn't a set programme is it?" Clara had said. "It can be varied? We've eaten lunch, we're drinking coffee, things are all very pleasant as they are; we're not obliged to gaze ever more frenziedly into each other's eyes and fall into a hectic embrace, fumbling at each other's clothes?"

This was so exactly what Ellie had foreseen that she could only blush; to counter which, her voice as cold as she could make it—she was by now almost in tears—she interrupted Clara's diatribe, saying, "I think you've made your point, Clara. Why don't we go for a walk?"

So they had gone for a walk, in the park, in the mud, under

newly bare trees hung with water drops, and here it was Clara who wept, leaning against a beechtree, with a scarf tied round her head. ("You look like the Queen," Ellie had told her.) Buckling and unbuckling the belt of her neat macintosh, the tears rolling down her face, she told Ellie how much she loved her, and asked what she should do. To which Ellie had no answer except that she did not see that Clara needed to do anything, why shouldn't they leave things as they were? Clara had shaken her head very slowly. Though they had parted in great tenderness, she had left Ellie more than baffled, almost in a state of shock, because what happened had been so unexpected.

Their second meeting took place two weeks later on Princess Anne's wedding day. (It would have been sooner had Lucy not been at home with bronchitis; moreover Ellie herself had caught a cold.) "Lights go out in the centre of London," proclaimed the headlines in Ellie's newspaper. This time Ellie, having queued interminably for petrol, met Clara in a pub by the river, in theory for lunch; in fact she was dragged back to her own house immediately and taken straight to bed.

She had never seen Clara in such frenzy. "I want to swallow you up, Ellie; I want you to swallow me," she hissed, opening glittering eyes, then closing them again upon sensation. "More, Ellie, more, more, more." "My tongue's not long enough," Ellie heard herself shrieking. They had not even bothered to undress—Clara lay across the bed, her skirt up to her waist, her buttons gaping open. Who, seeing the sedate Clara before or after in her neat grey skirt and blouse, would have credited it for a moment? Ellie could scarcely credit it even while they were screaming and writhing.

A week later, at their third meeting, Clara seemed once again another person. It took place briefly, in the gardens where they had first declared their feelings. They were both on their way to different dentists; a very subdued Clara confessed that far from being left elated by their passionate lovemaking, as Ellie had been, she'd felt uneasy ever since. She had found it frightening, and even reprehensible, she said, to lose control so thoroughly. In a wretched voice she added that if she suspected for one moment what she felt for Ellie was mainly sexual, she'd break with her at once, no matter how much it hurt.

They were passing a fig tree—not a tall tree, but bushy and

sturdy; its deathly grey branches already devoid of leaves offered only some withered green fruit, behind which waited the small green nodules that would be next year's harvest.

Clara picked one fig. After they'd walked on a little she threw it down, and said thoughtfully, "How frustrating it must be in this climate to keep bearing fruit which never ripens. How admirable of it to keep trying all the same. That's vocation for you, Ellie." There was both fear and longing in her voice. This time Ellie had come away from her not only baffled but angry.

Whatever is she playing at? It amazes me sometimes that she started this affair in the first place. I was so angry today I asked her why she had, and she said she'd always felt an attraction to some women, but had never dared tell any of them before. Her mother's coming over from the States the week after next; Clara has asked me to lunch to meet her. We haven't got any plans to meet before. How different even from a month ago. I suppose I should feel upset. Mostly I just feel blank.

Ellie's uneasiness concerning Clara had not improved her relations with Peter. Observing her changes of mood he became more and more morose; he snapped at her; grumbled about everything she did; took sides with the children against her. One Sunday, Ellie's sister Janetta came to lunch, and on Peter presenting some complaint against Ellie, told him tartly he could try being nice to her, that bullying would in the long run get him nowhere. But to Ellie, later in the kitchen, over the washing-up, she had said it would do *her* no harm to pay him some attention. Her voice was still tart. Janetta, so tough and sensible she sometimes intimidated Ellie, had never entirely approved of her, Ellie felt, though she was too successful now—as managing editor of a small music publishers—to be more than faintly jealous of Ellie's husband and children.

After she had gone, Peter came down to the kitchen where Ellie had started on the washing-up and told her what Janetta had said.

"Am I not nice to you, Ellie?" he asked.

"Not always," she said. "But then I'm not particularly nice to you." They tried to talk about this, reasonably, only to end up having a row about whether Peter should try and get to work next day (there was to be a transport strike).

"why," Ellie heard herself ask him nastily, "Why do you think your office walls will cave in if you're not between them?"

Whereupon he had furiously seized the bag out of the rubbish container (WHEN THIS IS FULL EMPTY IT) and marched outside to the dustbin, letting cold air flood into the kitchen.

On his return they tried again; still more rapidly this time they reached impasse, enmeshed in arguments they could not escape from. Perhaps they did not even want to escape.

The cat, however, had the worst of it; foolish enough to miaoul for food around Peter's feet, it got kicked away, gently, but not gently enough.

"Don't do that," screamed Ellie.

"Then feed him, you lazy bitch," he screamed back.

"Feed him yourself," she shouted.

Eventually, weeping in Ellie's arms, Peter said, "You don't really want to talk to me ever, do you?"

"I do," she wailed, "But you confuse me." Yet everything down to her tone of voice appeared counterfeit to her. When he buried his face in her neck, the smell and texture of his skin served to suck her back into old guilts and affections—she did not resist them, yet in some perverse way they resisted her. What is happening to me, she wondered clearly for the first time, then no longer clearly. Peter was telling her he loved her; but she could dredge up no love for him, only a frosty yet tender despair.

Ellie did not know what she expected Clara's mother to be like. She had never seen a photograph of her—Clara did not go in for showing photographs, though after the session they'd had with Ellie's family, Ellie tried to persuade Clara it was her turn to see some. Clara had promised she would one day, but had not yet got round to it.

Whatever Ellie had expected, however, it was not what she found when she walked into Clara's kitchen, rather bemusedly, having been kissed in the hall by Edmund, tongue and all. There, sitting at the table, watching Clara chop parsley with a mezza-luna, was a little thin woman barely half Clara's size, very smart, in a blue dress and knee boots, somewhat withered and with brilliantly dark eyes (only in them did Ellie see Clara) reminding Ellie, rather unkindly, of a monkey dressed-up; not least because she looked so uneasy, hunched into herself and darting glances everywhere.

The way she looked was one surprise; the second surprise was her American accent (of course she had an American accent, she was American; yet Ellie had not expected it) and the third, the astonishing fact that Clara called her Mom. Ellie could scarcely believe her ears. There was no reason Clara should not call her mother Mom, Americans did. But in Clara's correct English accent and from Clara of all people it sounded odd. Presumably Clara had never heard herself.

"Oh Mom," she would say helplessly, showing her mother the parsley. "Should I chop it finer do you think?" And then the next instant, irritably—she might have been talking to Hannah or Ellie. "Do sit *down*, Mom, let Ellie lay the table; she knows where everything is."

As for her mother; one minute she told Clara, severely, that was not what *she* called a cauliflower cheese (Clara layered her cauliflower with grated cheese and tomato instead of covering it with a cheese sauce, as Ellie did) and a minute later was asking timidly if she might smoke. (She smoked American cigarettes in a long tortoiseshell holder.) Yet for all her timidity and uncertainty, there was something obstinate and determined about her; that was presumably how she had survived; clearly she knew the business of survival.

Hannah arrived home from school now, for lunch; and she perhaps was the greatest surprise of all. Ellie had never seen Hannah animated before; had scarcely heard her talk, but today from the moment she entered the kitchen she scarcely stopped. For a few minutes she even sat on her grandmother's lap, with her arms around the shrivelled woman's neck, enveloping her. In her navy blue school sweater and white school socks she looked such a child, tall as she was, yet, beaming out triumphantly at the rest of them, she also appeared unassailable.

"Grommie," she kept saying, "Grommie I want to tell you this." Her grandmother, with an expression between pride and alarm, patted her head like a dog's, and called her "Hannah, honey."

"What a pretty sight," said Clara caustically. She had taken the cauliflower out of the oven and was ready to serve it, but suddenly she put the spoon down and advanced round the table till she was standing behind her mother and her daughter. Though fastening her arms round them, she couldn't quite encompass them.

"A still more charming sight, I daresay," she said smiling.

Hannah was scowling, the old woman grimacing uncertainly—she looked more like a monkey than ever, sandwiched between her daughter and granddaughter, both of them larger than she was, while Clara, staring at Ellie, seemed to be willing some kind of response; she glared when it was not forthcoming. What did she expect? What did she want? All ways, decided Ellie, half spectator, half unwilling actor expected to improvise on an unwritten part, all ways it was intolerable. Why should she involve herself in this? The smell rising from the neglected and cooling dish made her feel hungry. She had come to lunch; she wanted to eat; she wanted to eat *now*.

Edmund did not seem to like what was happening any more than Ellie did. He had turned his back on the whole scene and was clattering dishes at the sink.

Later Ellie and Clara exchanged fond enough farewells. Yet Ellie left Clara's house that afternoon feeling that she had been an onlooker only, her presence superfluous—she had never felt that before with Clara. She and Clara, as far as she could see, had exchanged not one significant word. She did not much mind—Clara's significant words promised little good these days. She dwelt more on how strange and uncomfortable it must be to see your mother old.

The last time she'd seen her own mother conscious, on the other hand, three days before she died, her hair tied in two bunches with little blue ribbons; made her look so ridiculously young it disconcerted Ellie. Briskly, she picked up a peach from the locker besides the bed and said, "Shall I peel it for you?"

"Ye . . . ye . . . s," her mother mouthed, nodding her head as emphatically as her weakness allowed. Otherwise it lolled as if it might snap off at any minute, like the head of one of the snowdrops which sat, brownish, in a glass beside the bed.

There had been no knife for the peach. Ellie had to brave the furious steel of the kitchen along the corridor to find one. Having peeled the fruit, she proceeded to slice its flesh into a thick white pottery bowl, concentrating on the task precisely—not least it saved having to look at her mother. It had never occurred to her before that a peach stone looked, just a little, like an image of the human brain; it was not an image she cared for in the circumstances. She set it firmly aside as she

mashed up the slices in the bowl, then tied a cloth under her mother's chin, and so efficiently it appalled her, proceeded to hold up her mother's head with one hand and spoon the mush into her mouth with the other. Scraping the juice off her chin, she could not help thinking that soon she might be doing the same thing for her own children. Her mother, too, God help her, was not her mother any longer, but her child—and how could she ever forgive her for that? At this moment her mother ("doesn't she look pretty," the nurses would have said as they tied the little bows, Ellie knew, she had heard them) mouthed at her and smiled, "The . . . licious . . . the licious." Her face full of joy, she licked up greedily the last remnants of flesh and juice. This peach might have been the first of her life, not the last.

Was it always like that when you were dying? Ellie wondered. One moment she found the childlike delight with which her mother wiped her tongue around her lips rather touching and beautiful, the next she did not think she knew how to bear it.

The following day she arrived to find her mother unconscious, tubes appearing from her nose and mouth; when Ellie's father shouted into her ear, "Darling, Ellie's here," she did not stir. Ellie stayed, half an hour or so, for her father's sake, and during that whole time she murmured once only, and the murmur was wordless.

Even Peter had long given up trying to persuade Ellie her mother would not die.

I never know where I am these days, I never know what Clara will say to me—does she want to see me or not? I feel like one of Pavlov's dogs given contrary signals. When I told her this Clara said I did certainly remind her of a dog rushing round in little circles and yapping frantically. At once she relented or asked if she was very unkind to me. I told her yes, she was horrible. But we were both smiling.

It was about this time that Ellie came to visit Clara, and as she stood outside, her hand raised to the bell, she heard a great noise within; in a moment she deciphered it as someone—Edmund, shouting—no, *bellowing*—at Clara, it must have

been—no one else would have been at home. She considered going away again, then told herself not to be ridiculous, and rung the bell. Instantly the bellowing ceased. It had been a minute or two before Clara answered the door, but when she did so, she appeared totally composed; it was Ellie who was disconcerted and did not know what to say.

"Is anything the matter?" Clara asked her after a little while, dangerously demure. "You're very silent, Ellie."

A moment later Edmund came bounding down the stairs, rubbing his hands together, and saying, "Oh, it's Ellie, is it?" and actually sounding pleased. In fact he seemed altogether pleased by something. Or maybe she imagined it.

Of course because it concerned Clara she wrote this down in her diary. Looking back later, she saw with amazement that at that time her diary contained almost nothing except Clara. The more the relationship appeared to contract (shedding a touch or caress here, a glance there), the more it obsessed her. Yet she did not see it as obsession then. Your state of mind always seems normal, she supposed, at the time that it exists. Certainly it had never occurred to her that it was strange she could scarcely let a moment go by without thinking of Clara. I must have been crazy, she decided, rereading her hectic thoughts. Only when she was in Clara's company did the world seem sane again and ordinary, as if nothing but the presence of the real Clara could drive out the ghostly one. Sometimes she emerged from their meetings feeling cleansed and emptied; in minutes her head would start to fill up again with shifting, furious, uncomfortable fears and hopes.

She never mentioned Clara at home these days. Peter complained of her funny mood; whatever was biting her? The question appeared to be rhetorical. He, meanwhile, had undertaken the reconstruction of the dark, damp cubby-hole he used as a workshop, and which was always at difficult times his place of retreat. He was a good carpenter—in fact altogether a good and practical workman. Ellie's own father being more or less incapable of hammering in a nail, she had always liked and admired this in Peter, and even envied him a little; especially now, when she hardly knew what to do with herself any more.

Gloomily she decided to begin on her Christmas shopping. It comforted her a little. A few days later she mixed her puddings in the breadcrock inherited from her mother, and used by her

mother too for the same purpose. Why do I make so many puddings, she wondered as she struggled with the unwieldy mixture. Why do I make Christmas puddings at all? On the other hand when Sam and Lucy came home from school and she watched them straining to turn the rich stuff with eyes closed, making wishes, just as she had used to when she was their age, she was grateful for the sense of continuity. There didn't seem to be any continuity anywhere else, in the world outside. Every time she went to buy petrol she had to wait in a queue for an hour. With miners and electricity workers only half working, with upheavals here there and everywhere, it seemed they were being irrevocably dragged towards catastrophe, and there was nothing any of them could do to stop it.

Sam and Lucy, normally devoted to each other, were very quarrelsome, these days. The issues did not seem important—who sat on which chair, or ate off what plate—should they watch this television programme or that. The only significant thing was how much one seemed to irritate the other. (And why not, thought Ellie, when she could manage to avoid feeling it was her fault for being in such a strange state of mind; adults get on each other's nerves sometimes; why not children?)

The arguments always ended in the same way, in screams and shouts. "She pushed me." "It's my turn." "He kicked my chair." And so forth. Distractedly Ellie would part them, while Peter said, "Something must be the matter. We must find out what it is . . ."

I don't suppose they know themselves," Ellie said.

"But we can't let them go on tearing each other apart."

"It's not as bad as that. They'll get over it."

She covered her helplessness with this blank response to him, and he replied, as she would have expected, "Oh you're hopeless. You don't care. They could be killing each other and you'd still be wrapped up in your own affairs."

Yet even this sounded blank; almost perfunctory. He, too, seemed to have lost track of all of them. From upstairs now came more shrill screams.

"Listen to them," Peter said. "Sam's crying. Again."

"No he's not, this time he's laughing," said Ellie, with relief.

Lucy and Sam seemed amicable enough that evening, as if they had made a truce. Sam did some more work on the pencil

case he had been making Lucy for weeks now, starting at school in the woodwork class, and now painting it at home, (What colours does Lucy like best? Shall I write her name on it?) The truce still held the next day. Ellie began to hope that from now on the arguments would cease.

But on the following day, at the time the children were due home from school, she heard screams in the front garden, and when she opened the door, Sam rushed past her, his head down, still screaming. Lucy stood on the front doorstep, pink-faced, smiling between guilt and self-righteousness. In one hand she held a painting torn in two pieces.

"I only wanted to *look*," she was protesting, indignantly. "He kept saying it was his best painting ever but he wouldn't let me see. All I did was try and take it. He wouldn't let go. He tore it, really. Listen to him now. He is in a temper again.'

They could both hear him from two floors down. Sam must have rushed straight to his room, and they knew what he would be doing, what he always did; his rages were spectacular. Ellie running upstairs after him expected to find his room rent apart—pictures torn down, bedding on the floor, cars, lego, soldiers tipped everywhere in an inextricable jumble which he would take days to sort out. (For he always did sort it out, crying sometimes as he did so, when he could not put together again the things he had destroyed—his model aeroplanes, his lego constructions. That was the worst of it, the way he destroyed the things that he had made. Once Ellie had managed to remove before it was too late some particularly elaborate constructions, only to fall downstairs with the box in which he kept them and break the lot. At least that had diverted him. He had stood at the top of the stairs, weeping and accusing her, "You've broken my battleships, you've broken *all* my battleships," apparently oblivious of the fact he had been about to smash them for himself.)

Today, however, he had not touched his lego, or his pictures, today there were no books on the floor, no model cars or soldiers. The regular thumping sound was Sam jumping up and down, over and over, on the pencil box he had been making so lovingly for Lucy. Ellie did not think she could bear it. But she could not stop him, and anyway it was too late, the box was nothing but splinters, on which, aware of her presence, he jumped the harder.

Briefly, seeing his wild eyes and open mouth, the way in his

fury his shirt had parted company with his trousers, she found herself envying his abandon—she had never been able to abandon herself like that. If only she could scream as Sam was screaming; she had longed, she realised, to scream for weeks, as loudly, louder if anything. But she could not. And anyway all her guilt and distress were focussing into this one thought that surely she should have been able to prevent Sam inflicting such pain on himself. Maybe Sam thought so too—he turned suddenly and screamed at her, "I hate you. You are not a proper mother," before flinging himself down on his bed and hammering at the wall with his fists. She stood there, powerless, looking at him. At last she bent and picked up the fragments he had left. Sam would not let her touch him then or later.

Even Peter had nothing to say when she told him what had happened.

"What a tragedy," said Clara coolly over the telephone. And then, more kindly, "Poor little boy. How my heart bleeds for him. Thank god we're old enough, we can detach ourselves more. What did you say his picture was? The one that Lucy tore?"

"A circus," Ellie said. "Very neat and well-spaced. I've sellotaped it together. I was going to put it up on the wall, but it doesn't seem tactful."

The conversation depressed her afterwards. The most amicable conversations with Clara would depress her these days. Yet still, even now, there were moments between them; a look, a touch; Ellie's face buried in Clara's neck or Clara's in Ellie's. Then Clara slammed the door shut again on both of them. Ellie sorry for herself felt as sorry sometimes for Clara—who would have rounded on her furiously had she known, having always declared furiously that she did not want Ellie's pity, let alone need it. Maybe she didn't; but at least it kept Ellie from expending all her pity on her own miseries. How tedious Clara said, Ellie's mournfulness was. Ellie agreed. She found her own mournfulness tedious too, but did not know how to escape.

"I think you could say," said the tall man, his pedantic manner at odds with his appearance—much curly black hair on head

and chest and an embroidered Indian shirt—"I think you could say that this party is to mark the end of Western civilisation as we know it."

"You make it sound like apocalypse," said Ellie, doubtfully, who had arrived irritated and upset after an uncomfortable telephone conversation with Clara and an argument with Peter over what she should wear.

"Yes, precisely. An Apocalypse Party. So glad you could come. Have another drink. Oh, hullo, hullo there. How *nice* to see you."

He passed on. Ellie's spirits sank still further. It was true the news got worse and worse. Letters in the "Times" talked of national crisis and of "the problems of maintaining a civilised society" and of "threats to British democracy", while Mr Heath had announced a three-day working week from the end of December. Just the same Ellie sometimes had the eerie feeling that the chaos and sense of doom emanated entirely from herself. Not just *the* world, *her* world was falling apart; all she could do was check on the pieces skittering away and marvel at the normality of things as she bought more stocking toys and crackers and tinsel for the tree, and made new lists of what still remained to be done. What *could* you do? One minute there were trains, coal, gas, electricity, you took it for granted there always would be; one minute she and Clara were like twin sisters, kissing cousins, were lovers till death do us part; one minute her marriage, though trying sometimes, seemed immutable, they always made things up in the end, and the next—what had happened—where had it all gone? You could not tell; only that everything had changed and that suddenly the Viking hordes or their equivalent were hammering at the gates.

And how did that accord with the familiar and ordinary sight of her friend Susie in the rather low-cut green and silver dress she had been wearing to parties all year heading towards her across the room? Her host, precariously balancing three glasses of wine between his hands, again paused at her side, "No one *looks* apocalyptic exactly, do they?" he said. "Still I suppose when the skies open and the dragons of wrath descend, there we'll all be in our jeans and gym shoes."

He passed on. Susie immediately took his place, but she had only come to castigate Ellie, it seemed.

"Still totally taken up with your fascinating new friend?" she

enquired. "I suppose you must be, considering that I never see you." Then she laughed. Ellie did not know whether to take her seriously or not. Susie tended to tell jokes deadpan and laugh round her bitterest barbs, but neither so consistently you could be sure which it was. Quite possibly she did not care in the least if she saw Ellie or not.

"Want another drink, Ellie, I do." she added almost at once and was off, squeezing between backs, flipping her wrist at Ellie. There was a Christmas tree close by hung with red and silver balls and reflected in the mirror on the wall behind it. Reflected in the same mirror Ellie noticed a thickset man in a purple corduroy jacket, apparently drunk, at least he was swaying rather, and accosting a series of women in turn.

"Come to Arabella's with me," she heard him say to each, in a faintly American accent—in vain—the ones who did not ignore him loosed his way the briefest, most embarrassed of smiles. He reached Ellie at last. She thought it was her turn to be invited, but for some reason his voice and gaze missed her.

"Want to come to Arabella's? I'm a member," he demanded of Susie, making her way back carrying two full glasses of wine. She gave him a shrill laugh and an amused but icy stare—then shrugged, raised her eyebrows at Ellie, smiled conspiratorially, and was gone.

"Come to Arabella's," he suggested to Ellie, without conviction. Perhaps he was beginning to feel discouraged. Perhaps he did not fancy her. She did not fancy herself this evening. She pushed herself back against the wall, touched her spectacles and replied, politely, "No, thank you very much."

"All right, all right," he replied, unabashed, and after waiting beside her another minute or two, surveying the scene, he shook his head and turned and lurched away. The party closed round him. Ellie found herself face to face with one person after another, shrieking banalities. The room was not only crammed, the ceilings were low, the noise too was tightly packed.

Next time she saw the drunk man in the purple jacket he was back by the Christmas tree, swaying a little, smiling vaguely. Somewhere he had found a large mug with St Thomas Hospital, the Nightingale Home, written on it in large letters, from which he sipped cautiously, continuing to scan the company over its rim. Several times his eyes passed over Ellie. At last—she was alone again—her eyes met his, inadvertently, dead on.

She ignored her first instinct to turn away. Instead, defiantly, she stared back. At this to her surprise, he began to lurch towards her through the crowd. Seeing that decided her; abruptly she too advanced on him.

"Do you still want someone to come to Arabella's?" she heard herself asking, loudly and clearly. "I've never been to Arabella's. I'll come."

He looked startled; as if that for the moment had not been in his head. Then he said, his accent just slightly more pronounced, "Well, well. I thought there must be at least one adventurous lady here. And it's you. Well, well."

He was still perfunctory. And the accent was definitely American—just for the moment she had wondered if it might be Irish. He did not even look at her; she wished herself anywhere else. All the same, feeling her colour mount, she kept her eyes steadily pinned on him. Sober he might not have been altogether unattractive, she decided—his rather smooth face, like one carved from wood with narrow eyes inset, reminded her faintly of the wooden Noah in the ark they had used to have as children, bought by their mother in Germany before the war. It was very disconcerting. It engendered in her a feeling almost of affection at the same time as disgust. He *is* disgusting, she told herself severely, eyeing his polished and buckled boots, the gold pin which held in place the large silk scarf about his neck. The effect was very careful, even dandified—he must have been sober when he dressed himself. Probably he was conceited. All the same, he did not care for being looked at; whenever her eyes caught onto his rather pale ones, between green and yellow-brown, they flickered away, past one of her ears or the other.

He did not, however, seem ill at ease. Why is it that someone drunk always puts you at such a disadvantage, she wondered, feeling suddenly very sober. She did not have anything to say to him. He was staring at her again intently.

"What an unusual garment," he commented, his eyes running up and down her patchwork dress—his hands picked out a patch here and there in just too familiar a manner. "Very cheerful," he added, loudly, circumnavigating her hand, trying to brush his off, "Like a hot drink on a cold night. Evidently you are a cheerful as well as adventurous lady."

"You are impertinent," she brought out.

"Oh very," he agreed. "But you are coming to Arabella's?"

"I might," she said.

"You're not going to let me down. You promised," he pleaded, rolling his eyes at her; more disconcerted than ever, she was wondering how to reply, when someone prodding her from behind turned out to be Peter.

"Oh," she said crossly. "This is my husband, Peter."

"Your *husband*?" the man smiled meaningfully, and swaying a little, took another sip of whisky.

"And who is this?" Peter asked, not politely.

"I'm Ed. Edward. Edward Warson. War—son." He bowed from left to right, the whisky slopping in the mug. Fingering his cravat pin, he added, "But I don't know the lady's name. Your delightful and adventurous wife."

"Ellie," Ellie said. She could feel the dislike and suspicion emanating from Peter as turning his back on the American he said to her, urgently, "Will you come and talk to Susie? I've had her for twenty minutes complaining you never ring her any more."

"She never rings me either," said Ellie. "So that's her problem. And anyway I've heard it all once this evening."

"Of course it's her problem," said Edward Warson, loudly, "Not ringing anyone as delightful as Ellie."

Peter winced, then glowered. Ellie, smiling at Edward, sealed her sense of alliance by leaning forward and taking the St Thomas' mug out of his hand. "I'll have some of that," she said.

"Whisky on top of wine will do you no good," warned Peter, frostily. "Too bad," said Ellie, glaring back at him. Edward had stopped peering round the room, clearly he'd decided that this marital altercation was entertainment enough.

"Happy Christmas, Ellie," he said, eyeing the Christmas tree.

"Happy Christmas, Edward," she replied, giggling, just as Susie's voice proclaimed behind her, "Ah my long lost friend. My ex-friend, I ought to say." She must have drunk very quickly both the glasses of wine Ellie had seen her carrying, judging by the pinkness of her cheeks and the shrillness of her voice. Her hair was awry, a nipple almost emerging from the green and silver dress, not that she had a bosom to speak of, besides having very pale eyelashes. I never did like Susie's eyelashes, Ellie thought.

"Another lovely lady," Edward was proclaiming. "Have some whisky. Come to Arabella's. Happy Christmas."

Susie, giggling, took the mug and drank, much more deeply than Ellie had. Spurred on, Ellie snatched another gulp, before handing the whisky back to Edward.

"Perhaps it's time we were going," Peter said.

"No, it isn't. I'm enjoying myself," she replied.

"Poor Peter," crooned Susie, "Poor Peter." She flung an arm around his neck. "You always were my favourite husband. I don't think Ellie appreciates you."

"And you're my favourite wife, Susie," cried Peter, nuzzling at her neck, still glaring at Ellie. Edward had held out a hand, and she not seeing but feeling it, put out hers on the instant and clutched his to her. How appalling he is, she thought, almost fondly, worse than Susie's eyelashes. Perhaps I *am* drunk. Perhaps I'm going crazy. For she was swinging his hand now, back and forth. Edward may not have chosen sides, she was thinking, but I have and that's it. Me and him against the rest.

"Isn't it time we went to Arabella's?" she asked, very clearly. "Oh by the way, Peter, I'm off to Arabella's. So I'll see you later, much later, I should think. Goodnight Peter. Goodnight Susie."

Sod the lot of them, she was thinking as they left the room, under the astonished eyes of her neighbours, I'm enjoying this. She did not dare to look at Peter and had the definite impression it was she who dragged Edward Warson after her and not the other way about.

The air outside was chill and sobering. "Well, that's my reputation gone," she said with satisfaction; a moment later, her exhilaration fading, thought, I must be crazy. Edward, clutching her arm complained peevishly of the dark and cold.

There was fog across the river; what with that and her uncertainty as to how much she had actually drunk, Ellie drove very carefully.

"If," she said to Edward coldly, "If you don't take your hand off my knee at once, I'm quite likely to crash this car."

"Don't I get some return for taking you to Arabella's?"

"Only a trip to Arabella's," she replied, swerving deliberately, but he did not seem concerned.

Never having been to a nightclub before, Ellie did not know what she expected; something livelier certainly. There was no band; instead, behind an elaborate, glittering console a busy

figure leapt and gibbered. Except for two languid couples the dance floor was empty. Edward Warson had ordered a bottle of champagne, though she had told him not to and it stood, cheap champagne she noticed, hardly more than sparkling wine, in a bucket of ice, leaning as drunkenly as Edward, who with one arm flung over the back of his chair, surveyed everyone and everything but her. A tall black girl in a silver cat suit, her hair cropped to the skull, came and whispered in his ear, calling him Ed and giving Ellie sidelong glances, while her long fingers stroked his cheek. She did not care about anything much, floating between one mood and another as she had all evening. Once, desultorily, Edward danced with her, both of them freckled by the gold and silver lights which swept the dance floor. When they returned to their table he did not sit down; leaning wearily against it and eyeing the champagne bucket, he asked, "Have you had enough? It's boring this evening; dragsville." He parodied the last word. Ellie thought he might be parodying her.

Outside he said, "You'll drive me home." No question mark appeared in his voice—she could, she thought, have driven off anyway and left him standing there, but she was unable to bring herself to do that.

This time, en route to somewhere behind the Portobello Road, he left Ellie's knee alone; instead regaled her with sexual anecdotes, mostly relating to his own prowess. "I'm supposed to have the largest cock in London. I've had girls queuing up, honey, literally."

Sales talk, presumably, she thought to herself; a moment later boldly enquired. But he did not reply, and when shortly after, they reached his door, he invited her in quite formally for a drink or cup of something.

"You can make me tea," she said, suddenly too tired to care what the consequences might be. She told herself that she needed something to wake her up, else how would she get home? Besides it was another piece of recklessness and she had been reckless all evening.

His room in a basement, down several stone steps, was untidy and uncared-for, but not at all dirty. There was an upright hoover standing in one corner. In another stood a large and elaborate drum kit—brass cymbals, drums of different shapes and sizes on aluminium stands—a black leather stool for the drummer.

"Oh yes, they're mine. I play in a band." He answered the

query she had not made aloud. When she picked up one of a pair of drumsticks lying across the black stool and struck the edge of a cymbal with it, he took it away firmly and replaced it carefully alongside its fellow—the most considered action she had noticed him make since they met—while the sound she'd raised echoed and echoed. He asked, abruptly, "Do you still want tea? How about something stronger?"

"Tea," she said firmly. "Please."

"China or Indian?"

"China," she replied, giggling, finding it absurd. He remained expressionless; indeed appeared suddenly so sober she wondered if the rest had been an act. While she sat herself down gingerly on the edge of the bed, he went and busied himself in a cubby-hole, just off the room. The only easy chair was hung about with clothes, laid neatly enough, some of them on hangers. On the seat was a pile of "Daily Telegraphs" and two pairs of suede shoes, both with shoe trees. It seemed so little like the setting for a seducer that she could scarcely take the matter seriously. When he returned and handed her a gold-rimmed china cup minus a saucer she clutched it, sniffing the aromatic scent, and watched with total detachment as he proceeded to remove his clothes, folding each garment and setting it on a hanger. Down at last to purple vest and pants—Marks and Spencer, Peter had some the same—he paused for a moment, eyeing her, then came over to the bed and started unpicking at her buttons.

"I've come for *tea*," she protested, jumping to her feet and retreating to the mantlepiece. The gas fire glowed. The shelf above it was lined with Christmas cards. "Love from Janey," she read on one. Had he taken off Janey's clothes in this room? If so judging by the XXX on the bottom of the card Janey hadn't minded. Surveying, fixedly, a comic snowman she tried to sip her tea. But it was still too hot. And meanwhile Edward had come up behind her and was continuing his button work, his hot breath on her back making her feel less real than ever. It was all the more astonishing therefore, and all the more infuriating when suddenly, as from another body but her own, but quite unmistakeable, as powerful as the smell of a sweating horse, she felt a surging of desire. The palms of her hands were prickling—damn, dammit, her knickers were distinctly getting damp. Damn, she thought, damn, damn, damn. I'm going home. Now.

But he caught her before she reached the door, and she was much too tired to struggle. Perhaps, truthfully, she had no wish to struggle. You couldn't call it rape, exactly, she decided as she lay under him. It isn't rape, I want it, I *want* it. And after all he's not totally strange, he looks like my old Noah. She hung onto that gratefully, her body meanwhile responding with reluctant but undeniable enthusiasm to what was as he had promised a very large cock, though whether the largest in London she could not have said, being unacquainted with the competition. The groans she heard could only have been her own. Who would have thought, she asked herself, that I needed fucking so badly? He, grunting, his face buried in her neck went on diligently labouring. His back was brown; his belly hairy and soft—she, however, lay with her clothes rucked up round her, because he had given up on the buttons in the end and removed only her knickers and tights. In a little while, after a series of much louder grunts he rose and kneeled over her, looking down with a self-satisfied expression, fingering himself as he did so. He was still, more or less, erect.

"I suppose you want some more?" he asked, complacently.

"Conceited bastard," she replied, mildly.

"Turn over," he ordered, "Turn *over*," more insistently—and when she stayed looking up at him, unmoving, sniffing his unfamiliar scent—too much aftershave for one thing—he reached both hands down and heaved, whereupon, obedient, she did roll herself about and meekly presented him with her rump; by now to her amazement and fury she was quivering with excitement.

"Oh you lovely bitch," he declared without emotion, "Oh you sexy bitch." Hitching her skirt out of the way he slapped her once, gently, on the right buttock, before coming into her again.

Afterwards he did remove her clothes and they both got into bed. Her body eased and humming she lay, her back on him, in the crook of his body while he stroked her with professional tenderness. Yet, perversely, all she could think of was Clara. A cloud of melancholy enveloped her, the loss of Clara's body imposed its full weight and significance on her heart. She thought she had ached and longed before; but she had never ached and longed like this.

"You acted like you hadn't been fucked in a long while," the voice was saying in her ear.

"Perhaps I hadn't," she said sleepily.

"Doesn't your husband ever fuck you?"

"Oh yes, but we've been married a long time. You know how it is."

"I don't. I've never been married. It seems a waste that's all. I don't think he appreciates you—Ellie?—you did say your name was Ellie? You strike me as a very very sexy woman."

"Perhaps he doesn't," Ellie said. Thinking; but Clara does—did. Oh Clara. It must have been all my longing for Clara that spilled out just now; how wildly she had heard herself shrieking and calling.

"Well, *I* appreciated you, Ellie. Do you want to come and see me again?"

"Not particularly," she said, politely.

"Why not? You enjoyed yourself, obviously. What's more I think you're adventurous at heart or you wouldn't be here. So how about being a little more adventurous? I could show you all kinds of exciting things."

"Like what?" she demanded; too curious for her own good.

"All *sorts* of things, Ellie." His voice was insidiously caressive.

"Like what?" she repeated. And when he did not answer. "Like your enormous cock, for instance? But I've already seen that."

She must get out now and go home, she was thinking. She *would* get out. He drew back from her, as if reading her thoughts. But as she started to rise he slapped her again; on the left buttock this time; and this time it stung a little, but not unpleasantly.

"I think you like that, Ellie," he was saying, smugly. His eyes were closed when she turned round to stare at him. "And what else, Ellie? How about—for instance—what is your position on anal intercourse?"

She giggled. "How many positions are there?" she inquired. He opened his eyes, and after a moment smiled faintly. "I suppose that could have been better put. Ah, Ellie, what do you do to me?" It was perfunctory again, and then suddenly more urgent.

"Well then Ellie. Tell me your views on this " He reached away under the bed, fumbled for what seemed a long time, while her curiosity increased, annoyingly, and at last sat up

again flourishing a pair of plastic handcuffs, complete with a large key.

"Nice, eh?" he said. "You'll never guess where I bought them. At Hamleys."

"You mean you'd like to handcuff me with toy handcuffs, *then* fuck me?" she asked in an interested voice.

"Not just fuck you, baby. There are a lot of other things I'd like to do to you before I fuck you." His voice had grown distinctly coy. He reached under the bed and started fumbling once more, and then with an irritated exclamation pulled out a whole box labelled 10 x 1 Sainsbury's extra-strength washing-up liquid. She did not see what it contained before he had pushed it back, having drawn from it this time a collection of leather thongs bound together roughly at one end—it took her a moment to work out the significance.

"You mean," she said at last, "You *mean*. . . ?"

"Oh yes," he was saying with enthusiasm. "Oh yes, I'm into whipping."

"Well, I don't think I am," she said, noting how he grew more American—more New York—every minute, both in accent and phraseology.

"How do you know if you've never tried it?," he was urging her.

"I don't want to find out; I don't propose to," she said. She had no sense that he would harm her—rather she found the whole matter entertaining. The only think she did not like—did not trust—was the small itch of sexual excitement she had begun to find in herself; fortunately he did not appear to notice it.

"Oh Ellie, Ellie, how you disappoint me," he was saying, his voice indignant, even hurt, but she was sure it was an act; he was obviously used to such a response. Propped up on one elbow, she by now, however, was surveying him with deep and rather mischievous curiosity; she was even enjoying herself.

"Never mind," she said. "What I want to know is why *you* like it. I mean what's in it for you? Do you just like hurting people?"

"Of course not. That would be *sadism*, Ellie." This time he sounded genuinely indignant. "I'm not a sadist. I never hurt anyone in my life. I've never done anything a lady didn't want me to do, and you should just hear some of them, Ellie, some of

them do beg for it, they can't have enough, they lie there screaming harder, harder; my little whip really turns them on."

"And your handcuffs. Don't forget your handcuffs," she said, demurely.

"And my handcuffs," he agreed. He was once more looking pleased with himself. He had closed his eyes again and was pulling apart, compulsively, the thongs of his whip.

"But you still haven't told me why *you* like it," she insisted.

"Hey, what's this," he grumbled mildly. "Are you a psychologist on a night off, or something?"

"No. Merely curious. I never met a flagellant before."

She saw him wince at the word flagellant, but he did not say anything, just lay back, his eyes closed and began fiddling, gently, with his cock.

"Does it give you a sense of power?" she asked, to encourage him. And at last, opening his eyes, he said thoughtfully, "No, I guess that's not quite it, though sure I get to feel a little macho sometimes. But I tell you what, Ellie, I tell you what I really think." And now, he, too, propped himself up on an elbow and spoke, confidingly, straight into her face. "You know what I do like; it really turns me on—and I'm glad you asked me, Ellie, I'm grateful. I guess I never thought about it properly before; I like the sound it makes; all the *different* sounds . . ."

His expression, she saw with amazement, was ecstatic—he raised his whip and flipped it (and she had to admire the precision of his blow; perhaps he was a good drummer) across the little cupboard beside the bed, which gave out in response a thin booming note. Then he added, very solemnly, "I guess it's because I'm a percussionist, Ellie, I guess that must be it." He raised the whip again and paused reflectively. She wondered if he was thinking of extracting a different note from her flesh. His face had grown very red, he was eyeing her with what? Calculation? Lust? Hatred? Surely not, he could not *hate* her. And in any case she was still detached and unafraid, and she asked, innocently, she absolutely did not mean to tease him (which was not to say that she did not find it funny; I wish I could tell Clara, she was thinking), "Wouldn't drumsticks sound different? Have you ever tried using your drumsticks?"

She thought he would hit her then, and not for pleasure. His belly—his rather thick, brown, hairy thighs—were quivering—he had raised his whip above them. She took one

look and leaped out of bed, grabbing her clothes from under and around him, her glasses from the bedside table where he had set them down.

"I must be going," she cried, catching her feet in the skirtband in her hurry to put it on. He did not try to stop her; lay back and closed his eyes once more, his face wooden like her Noah's, the thonged whip draped across his chest.

From the door she said, "Goodbye, Edward. So you don't use your drumsticks then?" And fled.

She laughed and shook alternately, all the way home; between glee, guilt, astonishment, shame; shame in particular at the pangs of sexual excitation which afflicted her every time she thought of him.

It was so late when she got home she expected Peter to be furious. But he only rolled over sleepily and asked, "How was Arabella's?" Ellie told him it was dreary. "What did you expect?" he said. "Nightclubs always are dreary." Then, wide-awake, he added, "You seemed to have picked yourself a particularly charming boyfriend. The Harpers (these were the party givers) didn't even know him, someone brought him without a by-your-leave, drunk as he was. They were furious, they seemed to think you'd done them a favour by removing him. He's a journalist it turns out; some kind of gossip-columnist—very second-rate." He sounded pleased about this. Ellie supposed she couldn't blame him.

"He told *me* he was a drummer . . ." she protested, puzzled by his cheerfulness. It was only when he said, "Well you set the place by its ears—everyone was talking about your dramatic exit," that she suddenly realised he was bathing in reflected glory; the man with the wild wife. That was a relief at least. She did not have to feel so guilty about making a fool of him if he did not see it like that. Besides she did not want to make a fool of him. (For someone whose pride was so easily knocked, his could be inflated by the most unlikely things, she thought; especially when they had to do with her.)

The next day, to her surprise, the itch of sexual excitation remained, eating up some of her pain over Clara; or perhaps, more accurately, transforming it. She did not find this altogether a welcome change. The telephone rang during the

afternoon; it was him, Edward Warson; goodness knows how he had discovered her number—she'd never told him her surname. She said no, loudly, at his urgent request for her company and put the receiver down, half-expecting, even half-wanting him to ring back, but he did not. A little later she tried to relieve her physical ferment by masturbating on her bed, but that only made it worse, if anything. She kept wondering what else he had had concealed in the Sainsbury's box. She kept remembering his, yes, enormous—and yes, well-practised cock.

What is it, she wondered—what is it? Why? Why do I have this desperate urge to surrender myself utterly and in such unlikely circumstances? It's humiliating. It's also suspect. Am I some kind of masochist, or what?

Sometimes with Clara she remembered having had the same intolerable longing to give way. Yet even with Clara she had never quite been able to. Of course in a sense she did have to hang on to herself; everyone had to. Yet why did she hold on so furiously? What was she afraid of losing? She was beginning to perceive dimly that at some point, in some place, she would need to let go, thought not necessarily sexually. Sex, she was realising at last, was only the metaphor, and not even a very good metaphor for what she was after.

Ellie went into London next day to finish her Christmas shopping. She'd wondered if it would be foolish, because of the IRA bombs, then decided not to let her life be run by such things. Even so, she found herself eyeing suspiciously the most innocent-looking briefcases and parcels. On her way back to Waterloo by underground, she ran to catch a train, just as the doors were closing, throwing her handbag ahead of her in an attempt to block them; but she threw too hard, the bag landed inside the train and the doors closing left her outside, appalled, but no more appalled than the people on the train. All of them were staring at the bag with horrified expressions. Obviously they thought it had a bomb in it.

"And did no one laugh? It must have looked ludicrous," Clara asked when Ellie was recounting this.

"No one at all. I daresay they thought I belonged to the IRA."

"You mean they were noting your description so they could tell the police?"

"Yes, of course. I felt very jumpy."

"Things *are* very jumpy just now."

"But entertaining in some ways," Ellie said; because it had seemed entertaining once she had got over her irritation and gone down to the end of the line to retrieve her bag. No one had dared touch it, the guard told her. It had been left lying on the floor of the carriage just where she had thrown it.

Meanwhile she was wondering out loud if she had enough to put in Sam and Lucy's stockings.

"Thank God Hannah and Daniel are too old for stockings," Clara said.

"But Clara you're never too old. All my family had them, even when we grew up. My father and mother gave them to each other. I still do one for Peter."

"How sweet," observed Clara.

"Oh well, it's a habit," said Ellie uncomfortably. "Because my mother did it, I suppose."

"And do you run your whole Christmas the way your mother did?"

"Of course I don't," Ellie said.

All the same she wondered about it afterwards. Because she had lied, she did do Christmas like her mother had. She had never questioned this—why should she? But now she asked herself how much else she felt she had to do because her mother did them. Of course there were some things she avoided doing precisely because her mother had not—but since this, too, stemmed from her mother, she could not escape in that direction either. And why should I escape? She wondered, redoubling her efforts. In any case it suited her to bury herself in preparations. At least it stopped her thinking about anything else.

At last Christmas arrived; Ellie even enjoyed it at first. They had all gone to church, the one day in the year they did, and on their return Peter's mother, Mrs Fletcher, appeared and handed out her presents, expensive as usual and as usual not quite right. Ellie got a scent spray, impossibly sweet, the children sweaters which did not suit them. Peter, however, was given a picture; there was much coy mystery about this; Ellie had been beckoned outside and asked to help carry it in.

"Don't let him see it, Ellie. He's bound to guess what it is from the shape."

Maybe, Ellie thought. But if he had known it was a picture he could not possibly have guessed its subject. She thought it was funny in a way and no more than she might have expected. Where on earth, she wondered, would they hang it?

"Why've you given Dad a bare lady?" enquired Sam with interest, surveying the by no means unpleasant lithograph of a nude seen from the rear and lying on a bed.

"It's such a *lovely* drawing," Mrs Fletcher said enthusiastically. "The moment I saw it I thought Petey must have that."

"It's very good. Thank you," said Peter in a flat voice. He and Ellie went downstairs immediately to attend to the turkey. Ignoring Ellie's enquiry as to whether he really did like the picture, he put on an oven glove and drew the bird out of the oven, shouting angrily at her to mind out of his way.

"Can't you see it's heavy, you stupid cow?" She kept well away thereafter. There were plenty of other things to do. For once Peter's rage, she realised, had little to do with her. Twice she heard him mutter, "My bloody mother," whereupon he glowered at her as if daring her to comment.

The red wine was already open upon the table. He poured himself a glass without offering one to Ellie, and took long draughts of it while he was stirring the gravy. By the time Ellie's sister Janetta arrived, and everyone came downstairs to eat, he seemed perfectly cheerful again and pleased by the praise for the tent he'd made the night before. He remained cheerful as they progressed through turkey, Christmas pudding, mince-pies, stilton cheese and strawberry jelly. The light faded outside; the good-humour grew noisier and more intense.

They had reached the almonds and the muscatels by now and were pulling crackers. The children screamed and cheated, insisted on reading out every riddle and motto, on lighting each firework, till the air was filled with a sulphurous smell. All of them were wearing paper hats. Peter had a gold star over one eyebrow, his mother exuded vinuous goodwill from beneath a crescent moon. Ellie and her sister, inadvertently catching each other's eyes, hastily tipped their own hats backwards; with any luck they would soon slip off, Ellie thought, her mood as flimsy as the paper. All over England she was thinking, at this moment, now, people are wearing paper hats and smoking cigars they don't usually smoke and pretending to be jolly—perhaps they really are jolly—as if there was no crisis, no

possible apocalypse. Oh God, the candles, look at the candles and the paper and the holly. I'd better move them; there could be a holocaust. But she did not move them. At this moment she remembered Clara.

What was Clara doing now? She had rung in the morning just before they left for church. "Happy Christmas," Ellie heard Peter say, answering the 'phone; immediately he shouted out to her, "Ellie, it's your bosom friend." She hoped Clara hadn't caught that, wishing her Happy Christmas in turn, confusedly. Afterwards they thanked each other formally for their presents. Clara had given Ellie two pairs of red tights and a silver chain which she was now wearing. Her present to Clara was an ornamental box she had found in a junk shop; looking for it took as long as finding all her other presents put together, but it was very pretty. Clara seemed to think so too. "We must get together when Christmas wears off," she said, but she did not suggest a date.

Was she too now in a haze of food and drink? Ellie was beyond caring. It did not seem strange, not even unpleasant to feel Peter's arms creep round her from behind, to have his mouth nuzzling at her neck.

"Light of my life. Woman of my flesh. How about some coffee?"

"I'll make some," she said. Yet he would not let her go, proclaiming to the company that his wife was unique; how clever and how right he'd been to find and hold on to her. Ellie did not believe he could be as drunk as he sounded.

She felt herself grinning feebly. "Let me go," she was protesting a long way off. "That is if you want coffee?"

"I do," he insisted, but still held on, while she continued to struggle. At last, disconsolately he dropped his arms, leaving her to feel she had rejected him, she did not quite know how.

In a little while Peter's mother departed. Already the mood was subsiding into something close to post-coital melancholy. It always did, Ellie thought, observing her family sprawled in languorous attitudes; at the far end of the room the children were disputing, without acrimony, a game that Lucy had been given. It was, she supposed, an idyllic scene. Just the same, the previous euphoria all sucked out of her, she felt profoundly depressed as she lumbered to her feet and started clearing the

table, ignoring Peter's protests that they should leave it for the moment.

She heard Sam say shrilly, "My action man's my best present, Dad. What's your best present?"

Either Peter did not answer or Ellie did not hear him. Sam's voice once more penetrated her stupor.

"Isn't the shirt Mum gave you your best present, Dad?"

"It would be," Peter lying flat on his back on the floor, spoke lazily and with sour good humour. "It would be if Mum had remembered my collar size."

Ellie froze, holding a bundle of dirty cutlery. "Aren't you fifteen?" she asked, knowing at once for certain he was not. That number had so obstinately sat in her head, making her reject many other shirts she liked, and in the right size. She knew, she had always known, what the right one was.

"I went to five shops looking for that shirt," she heard herself say indignantly, her face flushed, her voice very high, "Now," she grumbled, "I'll have to go back and change it."

"Or not. And borrow it." Peter's voice still teased. "Perhaps that's why you bought the wrong size; perhaps you bought it for yourself."

"Well, fair enough, since all the presents you buy me are for you," Ellie replied crossly. "All those bits of old junk." (Actually though old, most of them were not junk, but charming. This year he had given her a little wooden cabinet, an apprentice's piece, set with crooked examples of different kinds of inlay.)

"What I want," she heard herself wailing, "what I long for is something new and shiny."

"Oh. Oh." Peter was suddenly all contrition and sympathy. He came behind her again and put his arms round her. "Oh, poor old sausage, why didn't you say so, before?"

She unpicked his hands and threw them away from her. "I shouldn't have to say." Shame and irritation fed her gloom. Her head beginning to ache, she was conscious too of Janetta's dispassionate, potentially satiric eye.

"Oh come on," Peter wheedled her.

"Stop trying to humour me," she said.

He fell silent then. They worked at clearing up, side by side, avoiding all contact.

Eventually as if taken by some demon she heard herself

saying, "Well at least I suppose it was better than being given a picture of a fat nude, by my *mother*."

She was trying, vainly, to fit the remains of the turkey into the refrigerator, while Peter put cutlery away in a drawer. Clink, clink, clink, went knife, fork, spoon, into their rightful compartments in time to his voice. It took on a high, familiar note.

"My mother's a stupid old bag." And then, "I don't know what she meant by it. Perhaps she's going bonkers—anything else I can think of is indecent."

"Maybe she just thought it a nice picture," said Ellie. But Peter was glancing behind him at the children.

"I don't think this is a subject that should be discussed in the present company. Do you?" Seeing her still attempting to put away the turkey, he came and took the dish out of her hands.

"Anyone would think *you* were bonkers, doing it like that. You can see that dish is never going to fit. Why am I always surrounded by crazy women?"

"Are you calling Janetta crazy?" asked Ellie, coldly.

"Of course I don't mean Janetta. She's the only one with any sense. Aren't you Janetta?"

"Sucking up to my sister's not going to get you very far," Ellie heard herself say, more nastily than ever.

His face set and tight, he made no answer. He was wrapping the turkey in silver foil. When he slid it into the fridge, it fitted easily.

"You see?" he said.

"Oh God, why did I have to marry such a know-all?" Ellie's voice rose, emerged almost as a whine. She hated it. She could not stop. The children having gone upstairs to watch television, there was no stopping her, on and on she went, the goads increasingly perfunctory, like a habit she could not shake off; if they sounded bitter, she was too weary to feel the bitterness. She felt unutterably dismal.

"Why shouldn't your mother give you a nude?"

Or, "God send me a lover, I need one." (This on Peter's enquiring if she had heard from the American again. And had she told Janetta about that unedifying little episode.)

Or again, "Stop sucking up to Janetta."

Or, "Why can't you leave me *alone*?"

She could never remember afterwards which finally broke

him; it need not have been any one in particular. She only knew that suddenly Peter's fingers were digging painfully into her shoulders; that he was shaking her and screaming, his boot hacking at her shin; and that the next moment she was screaming too, in pain. To scream was what she had been wanting all along. She screamed again, more piercingly. "You're hurting me."

He flung her away from him; she fell on the floor and crouched there, sobbing. A long way away a question formed itself—"Is this being a battered wife?"—but it seemed entirely unreal, despite the throbbing in her shin and the lesser pains in her shoulders. Peter stood looking at her in silence. Without taking her eyes off him she rose to her feet, picked up a knife she had noted earlier half hidden among the greenery on the table and flung it at him with all her strength. She had not intended to hit him; it fell well short, clattering harmlessly.

Thereafter everything was blurred and confused—she plotted what happened from the resulting chaos rather than from her memory of Peter's fury. Posters were torn down off the walls, candles, chocolates, holly sprigs, fir branches, red ribbon, tinsel, the sheet she had used as a cloth, swept from the table. No one act seemed to release him, rather each inaugurated the next, and at last—and this Ellie did remember, vividly—he was to be seen wrenching apart a chair, or trying to, pulling it, kicking it, yelling over and over, "You bloody bitch. Throwing a knife at me . . . throwing a knife at me"—till the chair back came away in his hand and the row of spokes stood up unconfined. At that he stopped for a moment, stared foolishly at the piece of wood in his hand before dropping it and running out of the room, leaving Janetta and Ellie to stare at each other, their mouths open, as if paralysed.

From upstairs came the sound of the television set. The window was a blank, black square which Janetta approached at last, and covered, decently, with a curtain. Then, soberly, and in silence, they set about clearing up.

After five minutes or so, Ellie said—she had almost stopped trembling by now. "I didn't deserve all that, did I?"

"You did goad him. It was very stupid," Janetta said.

"I know, I couldn't stop . . . but it wasn't all my fault, was it?"

"No," said Janetta. "But you did goad him. You were each of you as bad as the other."

"Yes." Ellie said. In her diary, to her account of what had

happened, she added in large capitals CHILDISH. Because it had been; yet not quite childish enough.

Ellie had 'flu, mildly, on New Year's Eve, so could not go to the party she had been invited to with Peter. Instead she sat alone in bed and half-watched, half-slept, while jolly Scots sang and danced on her television set and in and out of her feverish dreams. Next morning she rang Clara to wish her a Happy New Year.

"Happy New Year," Clara said. And then, "I'm very busy at the moment, Ellie. It's the school holidays, you know."

"As if I didn't," Ellie said.

"You're very sharp this morning."

"I've got 'flu, that's why."

"Oh poor love. But I certainly don't want your 'flu," said Clara at once.

By which she means she doesn't want me, reflected Ellie bitterly; saying, though, "I don't feel a lot like seeing anyone myself."

"Well that's all right then," said Clara, brightly. "Maybe we could see a film or something when you're better."

"All right," Ellie said.

The three-day week began. It did not stop Peter going to work on the two days his firm were forbidden electricity, though he came home early, since it was not possible to work after dark without electric light. For the rest he and his colleagues sat in overcoats, their secretaries provided with manual typewriters. Shops, too, stayed open on the days without power, illumined by oil-lamps and nightlights, the assistants wearing scarves and gloves to protect themselves against the cold.

The effect was not only odd, but unexpectedly anticlimactic. It was January, of course, always a flat time after the hectic climb to Christmas and the New Year. Even so, now, with the miners' go-slow and its effects showing no sign of easing, something might be expected to happen, and when it did not, the air of drama Ellie had been breathing willingly for weeks evaporated tamely.

Neither Ellie nor Peter referred to what had happened at Christmas. Peter had been especially solicitous and kind during

Ellie's 'flu—for this she was grateful; as grateful as she was not to have to discuss his eruption; the broken plates had been replaced without further comment.

On Twelfth Night he arrived home from work carrying a large box which he laid on the kitchen table and said, "It's for you, Ellie. Open it." Inside, wrapped in layers of tissue paper, was a pale-blue cotton nightdress, pale-blue ribbon slotted into the white broderie anglaise that edged and decorated it. Obviously expensive, it was much too long for Ellie and too light a colour to suit her. All the same it roused in her something as near feeling as she had known since Christmas, and if compounded of guilt largely, never mind, it was feeling. She went to bed wearing the nightdress and let Peter make love to her for the first time since the row. It was very low-key, domestic lovemaking, but not unpleasant. When it was over Peter wept a little, wordlessly, but she, wishing to, found that she could not.

The following morning as she was taking coloured balls off the Christmas tree, and sighing over the pine-needles which seemed to have drifted everywhere, down the sides of the chairs, deep into the pile of the Turkish rug, the 'phone rang. It was Clara. Would Ellie see a film with her that afternoon? "Are you still there?" she asked as Ellie stood wondering wildly how she might lose the children for a few hours. Susie? She had not the nerve, she thought, to ask Susie. And besides Sam looked as if he might be sickening for the 'flu. In the end she said, very reluctantly, sure that a few months ago she would have managed it somehow, by hook or by crook, "I don't think I can. I've still got the kids at home."

"Of course—well, that's a pity," Clara said. "It would have been nice to see you. Another time, Ellie," and rang off, leaving Ellie gloomy and on edge for the rest of the day.

That evening Peter lit a fire in the sitting-room grate, and they burned the holly and the pine branches they had used to decorate the house. The fierce substance of the holly proved especially flimsy; the prickles browned first, then in a rush whole leaves, whole branches, flared up and shrank to nothing in a cloud of sparks, while pine resin and holly berries crackled and spat. Next day, denuded of its glitter, the house looked bare and bleak.

I find nothing in myself. Though I dream energetically every night I can't seem to catch my dreams. I'm not sure I want to. They feel as

mad as the people I keep seeing everywhere these days. I'm exaggerating of course. Yet this afternoon it was raining, and coming back through the town I saw a man holding up an umbrella—a very conventional-looking man, with a beard and wearing a tweed cap and jacket. But I heard him muttering, the more loudly as I passed, obviously for my benefit, "We're all bags of mutton, we're all bags of shit," over and over. I don't think that he was drunk.

This was the week Comet Kahoutek was supposed to be visible to the naked eye. The first day it had been promised, Ellie went up to the terrace at about a quarter-to-five, with Sam and Lucy. Many other people seemed to have had the same idea; they were lined up at the edge of the hill, between the trees, some with telescopes, watching as the sky's colour deepened and the stars grew perceptible. Venus diverted them for a while; voices were to be heard enquiring if that was Kahoutek; but it did not move, and other small glitters that did, showed themselves all too soon as the wing lights of planes.

There was something hypnotic about watching the sky so closely. Ellie began to feel light-headed after a while, anchored only by the children tugging at her hands, and the longer Kahoutek did not appear the more she longed for it—she held her breath like a child with longing and anxiety—yet coming up here she had expected nothing much. Was that it? Was that? Each time hope mounted, and as soon sank. The children were beginning to squeak with boredom and irritation. "It's not coming is it? I don't believe it." Other children had given up altogether and were running in and out among the winter trees, but Sam and Lucy stayed with her still, for which she was grateful, not only were their eyes much better than hers, in other ways she seemed to need them there, with her, peering outwards, into space.

A sharp finger poked Ellie's arm at last and someone proclaimed in her ear, "Wake up. Wake up. Surely you don't think you'll see Kahoutek now? Five fifteen they said; it's almost six," followed by a shrill laugh. Susie; clearly Susie. Even so for a wild minute Ellie thought it might be Clara. But why should it be Clara here?

"No," she said. "No, I'm mesmerised, that's all, aren't you?"

"What big words you use these days—it must be your artistic friends. Do you want a cup of tea—or better still a drink?"

"Yes please," Ellie said. So off they went, Ellie and her disappointed children, Susie and hers, to sit in Susie's kitchen—much less orderly than Clara's kitchen, but much more efficient than Ellie's, having a notice-board crammed with school dates and jumble sale notices and reminders to go to the dentist or buy more washing-powder or get tickets for this play or that. It was like slipping back weeks, months, years, into a past where Clara had not existed. For a moment Ellie wished sharply that Clara never had existed, at least not for her. Better tedium than . . . which was not to say that Susie was tedious; whatever Susie might be, she was not tedious at all.

"Well," she was asking, her look sly, as she nibbled on an olive with her sharp white teeth, "Well, Ellie, how's things? That was quite an exit you made by the way, from the Harper's party. Was it fun?"

"Then. Not afterwards," said Ellie. But she did not want to talk about that evening, and nor it seemed did Susie; at least she did not press it.

"Still seeing your new friend?" she enquired next, eyeing Ellie still more closely.

"Yes. Sometimes. It's been the holidays of course, and I have had 'flu." In defending the point Ellie gave herself away, and knew at once she had. Susie laughed.

"Come on Ellie. You don't have to explain things. Why should I care? Has she jilted you?"

"Of course not. It's not like that." Ellie was blushing. "It's time I went home."

"Sit down. Have another drink. I'm not prying, you know, it's nothing to do with me. Drawing my own conclusions is another matter."

"Draw as many as you like," said Ellie, regaining some of her composure. "Have you got a lover these days?" she enquired of Susie.

"Oh God no. I don't seem to have the energy any more. Sitting about waiting for 'phone calls. Mooning round the supermarket and finding when you get home you've half the stuff you wanted. Thinking up excuses for Gregory." (Gregory was Susie's husband, a mild and friendly man.)

"You never used to mind," said Ellie.

"Didn't I? All the same I'll leave lovers to you, Ellie, for the moment; lovers of either sex. Do stop blushing—that was what

it was all about, wasn't it? People don't usually disappear so completely otherwise. You never have. But why should I care Ellie? What does it matter, what difference does it make? It's nothing to be ashamed of is it? It doesn't turn *me* on but—oh, Ellie, how middle-class you are." And she laughed her shrill laugh, shriller than Clara's, for she was another person who had always teased Ellie about her ultra-respectable background. Ellie had never used to mind, but now, because of Clara, she did not think she could bear it.

"So what?" she shouted. "So what? So *what*?"

"Keep your hair on," Susie replied.

They had glared then, eye to eye, like two children daring each other not to look away. But they could not keep it up. Soon they were looking at each other instead with that mixture of derision, irritation, affection and mutual incomprehension that had always characterised their friendship. Ellie even started laughing in the end. Though they continued bickering, she returned home feeling better, as she always used to, except when she had gone home seething with fury, for Susie sometimes went too far. She had almost gone too far today; had, altogether, seen too far. But unexpectedly, her first shock and embarrassment over, Ellie did not think she minded. It made her aware how utterly alone she had been till now with both her ecstasy and grief.

In the paper today a woman was accused of ill-treating prawns—how do *you ill-treat a prawn—boil it alive?—but everyone does that, I can think of worse things to be guilty of.*

A few days later Lucy arrived home from school just as Ellie, having forgotten she would be early, was setting off shopping. "Can we go to the ice-cream shop?" Lucy asked, when Ellie suggested they went out together, and in a rush of affection for her daughter, her navy-blue duffle coat too short in the sleeves and tight across the shoulder ("You must get her a new one," Peter kept saying; in time, with any luck, he would do the job himself), Ellie agreed. "But don't tell Sam," she said, "I'll buy him an ice-cream another day. I don't want to have to go down to the town twice." And she and Lucy exchanged looks which at once transformed the matter into conspiracy, as between lovers or other gentle partners.

They had reached Sainsbury's at last, in a hurry, because Sam was due home soon. The aisles were sparsely populated; Ellie was quietly reaching down cans of tomato puree, thinking of nothing except that one was dented, and perhaps she should replace it with another, when suddenly, behind her, she heard the clash of wire baskets and turned as a West Indian voice bellowed, almost in her ear, "You push me, yes, you push me. Why you push me then?" the target was not Ellie, but a small, elderly woman with impeccably curled grey hair and a bright pink coat and hat who stood on the far side of the aisle, clutching to her like a shield a basket containing two packets of dehydrated oxtail soup and half a pound of Devon butter, and looking so appalled and helpless Ellie felt sorry for her. But she felt equally sorry for the West Indian with her intensely burning, rather bloodshot eyes; she did not think she had ever seen such a bitter, unhappy face. The West Indian too held a wire basket, empty except for a large bottle of malt vinegar, but used hers as a weapon, advancing relentlessly on the pink coat and hat, their wearer twittering in protest and cowering against a shelf laden with cornflakes.

"I'm tired of it. I tired of being pushed about, just because I black. Yes, you did. You pushed me, lady, you jostled me deliberate."

An audience had gathered from nowhere, the voice that had drawn it boiled on regardless. Ellie grew frantic.

"No," she heard herself saying, "No, please don't fight," and before she knew she'd meant to, she had placed herself between them, the wire frames of their baskets pressing against her hips and belly, while behind her Lucy tugged at her coat, crying "Mummy" in an anxious voice. Ellie ignored her, pleaded again, hearing the futility, "Oh please don't fight." She might have been talking to Sam or Lucy. But both women ignored her, one from terror, the other anger; after a brief and scornful glance at Ellie she began to propel all three of them down the aisle towards a case which held chicken and turkey portions, legs, wings, breasts and thighs, shouting at the pink woman more loudly than ever, "You think you can jostle me, eh? Well, I tell you, I will not have it."

They had almost reached the end of the aisle; the voice died to subterranean mutters, matched by the embarrassed and disapproving murmurs of the specators. The West Indian glowered

at them, her expression both blank and full of hate; then, their presence apparently goading her still further, she gave one more indecipherable shout and in a sudden furious lunge reached round Ellie, seized her adversary's basket, and tipped it, sending soup packets and butter stick tumbling to the floor.

"No," Ellie repeated, but no one heard, and in any case it was no longer necessary; honour seemingly satisfied, the woman took back her hand, shook her fingers as if to decontaminate herself, and having given one more gentle shove for good measure, muttering, "Now you not push me again. No. *Never*," she kicked away one of the packets of soup, then turned her back and stalked off, leaving the audience staring after her. The under manager who came hurrying to sort out the disturbance, found no disturbance, only a small woman in pink being comforted by a larger woman in a fur coat, while others picked up her packets of oxtail soup and butter, throwing occasional disapproving glances after the lonely figure of the West Indian striding off along the aisle, her tongue licking nervously at her lips, her eyes peering this way and that.

No one took any notice of Ellie; she was, in any case, wholly occupied with Lucy, who agitated, even tearful, her mother having made of herself a public spectacle, was bombarding her with questions. What was the matter with the woman, why was she so angry? And when Ellie suggested she might be unhappy, *why* was she unhappy and so on, all the way home.

Hearing Ellie tell Peter the story that evening, however, Lucy said, giggling and with a sly glance at Ellie, "Mum said we should have asked her in for tea; the black woman, I mean; because she was unhappy."

"Well, Mum's a nice person," replied Peter, smiling at Ellie, kindly. He was so kind these days, so benign, and kept on praising her. Ellie knew it was perverse, but she wished he'd stop. It hurt.

She did not expect much of Clara these days; did not seem to want anything much, though even the smallest contact with Clara could please her, much to her annoyance. Otherwise she refused to let herself be upset by anything, and congratulated herself on her own calm and strength.

An abstract design she'd worked out for a lino-cut had turned into a whole series now. She even got as far as cutting some.

Day in, day out, she worked at the kitchen table, gouging and rolling; sometimes ending the day weary and disheartened, sometimes elated. The results were pinned up all round the kitchen. At such distance they ceased to appear so abstract; trees and towers, wombs and vulvas were appearing everywhere.

Peter said, "They're very female aren't they?" Why, he enquired, had she stopped doing her animals? After a week or so he even asked if she would take them down; they disturbed him, he said, he did not know why. He made a small joke of it, more against himself than Ellie. The children from the start laughed at them with an innocent yet knowing ribaldry that Ellie did not find objectionable. In a way it relieved her. She herself did not know what to make of the pictures once she had emerged from the heated state in which she initially doodled them. What disturbed her most was that she could not catch what she was seeking; worse she did not even know what she was seeking, only that it was not there, it slipped away between trees and towers, the wombs and vulvas.

She still had not shown any of her prints to Clara. Clara never came to Ellie's house now, though Ellie had been to Clara's once or twice. Nor had they got to see their film—one day Ellie phoned and suggested it, but Clara said she was too busy, these days, to go to the cinema.

With Ellie so occupied, the house grew untidier. Ellie did not care. Inanimate objects seemed to have less power to frighten her than they used to; she was much too involved with the ones that she was struggling to reach on paper. To her surprise, Peter did not complain. Still subdued, he claimed to be glad she was working—Ellie let the hint of patronage wash over her, and accepted, gladly, his offers of help around the house. One evening he hoovered the stairs, on another evening the sitting-room. On a Saturday morning they set to work together. Wonders will never cease, thought Ellie.

The winter was damp and grey and green; like fir trees, dark, not cheerful. Ellie did not feel cheerful.

"I never knew before that sadness and unhappiness were not one and the same thing. But I do know now. I am not unhappy. I am very sad," she wrote in her diary. (But she wrote very little in her diary these days.)

Into which mood, flowing round her like water of a tolerable temperature, Clara dropped not a pebble, but a boulder.

She rang Ellie one morning around midday which was in itself unusual—normally she waited for cheaper times—and announced formally that at the end of January she had been lent a cottage in Avebury, near the Stone Circle, and was going there for a long weekend to recuperate from this and that. It had occurred to her that Ellie, too, might be glad of a break. Would Ellie like to come? Ellie, equally formally, replied that she would love to, but of course it would depend on Peter and the children. Could she ring Clara when she'd sorted something out. Then she put the 'phone down, breathless suddenly, and wondering how on earth she would put the idea to Peter. She had already set to work on the kitchen table, but now pencil, cutting tools and roller alike lay idle beneath her hands, while she held conversations in her head. When would be the best moment to talk to Peter—presumably it would be best to wait till the children were in bed. All day, she grew more agitated, and when he arrived home—for once he was early—she dragged him into the sitting-room and gave him a drink, which he looked at with astonishment. Then she broached the matter baldly; as request in the first instance—behind her reasonable words lurked, she knew, ready for use if need be, a defiant statement that she intended to go whether he liked it or not; plus a litany of shrill reasons to back it. But he did not object. She sat, disconcerted, disappointed even, and with a sense of anti-climax, while he threw back at her her own arguments. How good it would be for her; she could do with a rest; of course he could take sole charge of the children for the weekend—what kind of a fool did she think he was? He could run the house as competently as she could; more competently, in fact.

Nor next day nor next week did he change his mind, though she half though he might. It is true that as the time approached he began to grumble and to issue provisos. But that was normal. She would have been surprised if he had not, though as usual she let herself be irritated by it, and thereafter put on the defensive by the unspoken suggestion that it was, after all, unusual behaviour for a wife, and particularly generous of this husband to allow it. However she did not mind attending to his instructions; both children had drawers full of clean clothes; the fridge was packed with food; she had even baked a fruit cake. (Sam complained that he did not like fruit cake.) Such preparations did not leave much time for her own work, but she did not

feel like work in any case, all her thoughts and dreams focussed on the expedition with Clara. Her feelings were, however, by no means simple; she was not only excited but apprehensive, even considering sometimes whether to lift the telephone and tell Clara she could not come.

The weather remained warm and wettish. How different, she found herself remembering, from the January of the year her mother died. Snow had fallen just before that started, blanking out the country, bringing everything to a halt. Even in London the streets were thick with snow. Peter and Ellie had gone down by train to Ellie's parents' house in Sussex so that Ellie could look after her mother, while Peter commuted every day to London. It meant Ellie leaving her job as picture editor, but she had not minded, she had some ideas for work of her own. More especially it was a relief to know she could be of help—it eased her guilt at having been so wrapped up in her new-married happiness with Peter the past few months that she had not always taken sufficient note of how ill her mother was. Even so it would have been hard if her mother had remained heavy with fear—but she did not. Though she was plainly not getting any better, and if anything weaker, spending more of each day in bed than she had used to, she did not at this time seem so burdened by her illness—or at least she did not burden Ellie with it. Of course there were bad days when she was weak or full of grief, days when she raged about minor matters which in her weakness she could not attend to. But these were only a small part of things.

Every morning Peter and Ellie's father put on gumboots and set off to walk to the station to catch their train to London; thereafter Ellie and her mother were left alone.

Ellie spent hours sprawling across her mother's bed while they talked of this and that: Ellie's work; her mother's childhood. She filled Ellie in, moreover, on years of village and family gossip; who had lovers or mistresses in London, what respectable figure had had some liaison with some other equally respectable husband or wife; how one, rather pretty but innocuous-looking woman, kept her wild husband under control entirely by sexual means. Ellie, who had naively taken for granted the total conventionality, not to say innocence of everyone around her was astounded. What about them, she wondered, her parents? But if she did not doubt their fidelity to

each other she was probably right. Her mother related these habits and misbehaviours without censoriousness, but with a hint of detached irony which separated her from such things. Apart from that her parents loved each other, and in all ways. (Ellie had once arrived home unexpectedly and found them making love on the sitting-room floor. They must then have been married twenty-three years at least.)

They did not talk these days like mother and daughter, but like friends. Ellie had never felt such friendship with her mother before—she had not loved her less, of course, but differently, not as someone like herself. They would keep up their conversations by reference or aside when the two men came home and Peter at least felt excluded, though he made a joke of it.

"You're like conspirators," he said.

"But not conspiring against you," said Ellie.

"You don't have to be," said Peter wrily.

Both at the time and looking back this was a period that seemed set aside from all others. The weather, it was true, played some part in the separation and strangeness. No thaw came, the cold went on, day in, day out. The snow and frost excited Ellie childishly, every time she went out. It seemed to excite her mother too. She did not say she would like to be out in it like Ellie, but clearly she did. And if Ellie had ever doubted her father's devotion, she could have no longer, watching now how he remedied the matter, by bringing the winter inside, to her.

He brought her a long icicle; he brought her leaves thick with hoar frost. Above all he brought her hungry birds. They had been feeding the birds anyway, but one morning he put crumbs on the bedroom window sill, and the next day he opened the window and scattered them inside; each day he brought the crumbs nearer. In the end there was a trayful of scraps on her mother's bed. Not all the birds ventured that far, but a sparrow or two did, and one robin became so bold he would even peck crumbs from her finger. Ellie did not know which was the more awesome and beautiful, the expression on her mother's face as the robin pecked at her fingers, or her father's observing her mother's pleasure and delight.

The idyll, such as it was, came to its inevitable end. The robin turned into a nuisance tapping on the window at dawn, waking her mother up just when she had fallen asleep; it was as

persistent, Ellie thought, as the disease which began progressively to slur her mother's speech. The doctors came back and desperate measures were decided on; too desperate she was ever afterwards to think. One day her mother was sitting in her bed, the next she was in an ambulance on her way to hospital for an operation to curb the activity of her pituitary gland, and Ellie and Peter were returning to their icy flat. Ellie was left with feelings not only of loss and fear, but also of having somehow been cheated; that she had been shown something rare and precious, only to have it snatched away, leaving her ever after to peer through a door too small for her, into an apparently paradisical garden.

Part Three

That Friday evening Peter drove Ellie over to Clara's and stayed briefly for a drink, he and Edmund jocular at Clara and Ellie's expense.

"How patronising they were. We might have been schoolgirls let out of school for the first time," complained Ellie during the drive down to Wiltshire.

"Don't take any notice. You let such little things annoy you," said Clara, and laughed. She laid a hand briefly on Ellie's knee, then took it away again. She had hired a car for the weekend, a blue mini, for Edmund had needed the Volvo, and she insisted Ellie did not ask Peter if he could spare their Renault. Ellie was grateful—he would probably have said yes, then grumbled incessantly—he had grumbled enough when it came to it about Ellie's going. "OK, I won't go," she had said defiantly. "Of course you must, don't be silly," was his reply, after a brief and unfamiliar look which might have been hope had passed across his face.

Ellie, driving, was surprised to find that her chief emotion towards Clara at the start of this excitedly, apprehensively, long-looked for expedition was, of all things, irritation; because Clara would keep chattering on, about nothing very much—a coat she had bought and now decided she did not like, whether it would be worth trying to take it back—some problem about Edmund's latest work—a confrontation she had had with Hannah and Daniel—all this lubricated by shrill laughter. Perhaps Clara was nervous? I doubt it, thought Ellie, crossly, as they turned off the A4 onto the narrower road that led to Avebury itself, the headlights picking out the many-faceted stones that lined it, each one part of an order and yet a solitary sentinel.

The cottage, when they reached it, was cold and dark. At ten-thirty at night it was not worth lighting fires, they turned on the

electric storage heaters and the hot water system, then went to bed. There seemed little else to do; though the cottage appeared pleasant, with low lamps and pine furniture and several kinds of peasant ornament, they did not yet feel at home in it, or alongside each other.

Clara showed Ellie round upstairs. The bathroom floor was on a definite slant, and the hot water emerged with much choking and sighing, after a long pause. Next to it was the main bedroom—Clara flung open the door to reveal a large brass bed, but Ellie's hopes were scarcely raised before another door revealed a narrow white room, off which led a still smaller one, each room containing a single bed covered by a white coverlet. The effect could not have been more virginal.

"We'd better sleep in these," said Clara, firmly. "I'll take the far room if you'd like."

Glumly Ellie went downstairs and filled a hot water bottle. Then she cleaned her teeth and climbed into her still icy bed with her socks on. She had not expected much, she told herself (oh no, whispered a more cynical little voice, oh *no*?) as she lay resigned, with her eyes shut.

"Are you asleep? No, surely not?" Clara's voice came from just above her head. She stood over Ellie in a check woollen dressing-gown, so large and utilitarian it must have belonged to Edmund. She carried a flowered sponge bag in one hand, and when she bent to kiss Ellie goodnight, smelt and tasted of toothpaste. Her lips—they were very dry and cool—brushed Ellie's momentarily and turned aside; under the glare of white light reflected on white walls, they hugged each other in silence. Though wrapped in Clara's warmth and close to her scented cheek, Ellie had only the faintest sense of Clara's body, the folds of the wool were so deep, yet it seemed an endless embrace until Clara unlocked her arms and went into her room, then it seemed to have taken no time at all.

Ellie lay awake a long time hoping Clara would return, but she did not. The silence was total, huge, invasive; and eventually she fell into it herself and slept (she had not slept well the night before, lying awake and imagining how the weekend would be.)

Next morning the drip drip of rain outside penetrated Ellie's consciousness long before she was awake enough to identify the

sound; it exacerbated the sense of apprehension—even foreboding—which she grew aware of next.

But nothing happened; they got up late, and Clara made breakfast while Ellie lit a fire in the huge open grate, and tried, as she coaxed its flames into life, to extinguish the one licking at her gut. She succeeded up to a point; the fire itself helped, and Clara's toast and coffee, yet a kind of dull heat persisted in troubling her, the more because she could not entirely determine its nature; there was rage in it, yes; fear, yes; longing, yes; lust, yes; yet she only had to glance at the dressing-gowned Clara sitting on the arm chair opposite her (extracting at this moment, with meticulous care, what was it—a hair? from her coffee) for the whole thing to seem absurd.

In the checked dressing-gown Clara appeared particularly bulky; after a while Ellie decided it was not just the dressing-gown, Clara actually had put on weight; her jaw too was a little heavier; in consequence Clara seemed nearer middle-aged than Ellie had previously seen her—yet far from this turning off her feelings, it heightened them, wrenching at her heart; so did the sight of Clara's bare feet tucked up under her, like a child's. Having finished her coffee she was reading volume two of the Everyman edition of *Middlemarch* which she'd taken from the shelves in the corner. Her gold-rimmed reading glasses made her look severe, an unlikely object for passion.

Damn you, Clara, damn, damn you, Ellie thought. How could she be so deliberately impervious? Because she was so, wasn't she?

This was one face of reality on a wet winter morning; another was the cottage itself. Very pleasant, yes; tasteful, Ellie thought with a grimace, but with enough idiosyncrasy to make that tolerable. She particularly liked a recumbent Buddha, his head pillowed on his hand. For the rest there was a stripped pine floor and a stripped pine table; converted oil lamps for light, one hung over the table on a thick brass chain; an indifferent green landscape in a frame made of varnished shells which ought to have appeared kitsch and didn't; several painted Indian horses of different sizes, a little technicolour juggernaut, and two terra-cotta figurines, also Indian, both of women with hair up in topknots and pointed breasts and bell-shaped skirts; fertility objects she thought, if not they looked like it. All these were set

on windowsills and shelves, while on the table stood a huge blue and white china bowl, once part of a toilet set and cracked down the centre, containing four walnuts, five brazil nuts, two dried-up holly-leaves and a scrap of tinsel clearly left over from Christmas, and a withered tangerine.

Finally there was a bookcase, only half-full of books, including paperback thrillers and detective stories, one of which she grabbed sulkily and read, determined not to let Clara's superior silence get the better of her.

"How can you waste your time on such rubbish?" Clara said at last. Laying aside *Middlemarch*, she had gone upstairs to dress and having returned, wearing the fleck tweed skirt which Ellie hated, she sat doing perfect tight drawings of the nuts in the big bowl on the table, never stirring from her place, hardly even stirring in it, while Ellie, still dressing-gowned, roamed from seat to seat.

"How restless you are, Ellie," Clara added. Ellie wanted to shake her, and knew that Clara knew she did. How long could this war of nerves go on, she wondered; for war of nerves it was. Seeing the swift movement with which Clara rose to her feet and snapped her drawing-book shut, she realised that Clara was not as tranquil as she seemed. But that did not make things any easier. Angrily she seized a walnut from the place where Clara had set the nuts to draw and cracked it open on the hearth with a poker. Then she tried to repeat the process with a brazil-nut. No matter what, the shell resisted her.

"Why not look for a nut-cracker?" suggested Clara, laughing, while it skidded away under Ellie's frantic blows. In the end she threw it on the fire in disgust.

"What a waste," observed Clara.

"Clara, you are insufferable," Ellie said.

"Am I?" Clara took Ellie by the arms and dared her to go on, staring into Ellie's eyes with a look that seemed nearly hate.

But the moment passed. Outside, across the street, a woman in a green plastic mackintosh lowered her umbrella to go through the lychgate into the churchyard. Is it going to stop raining, Ellie wondered, then went out to the unheated kitchen and started slicing up tomatoes for a salad, penetrating the skins to their seeded centres with a sense of vicious relief.

Once, gathering up utensils to take through to the sitting-

room, she dropped a glass on the floor. It was plastic and bounced. "Fuck," Ellie screamed. "Fuck." If that was audible next door, Clara made no acknowledgement. Ellie promptly felt absurd, and resented more than ever that she was being made to feel and behave like a difficult and sulky child.

In the afternoon the rain eased. They went out to walk round the stone circle. No one else was there; only a sheep or two nibbling at the shaven grass around the base of the stones; each stone standing by itself and close to, unlike any other one, leaning this way and that, eroded differently, faceted differently with the marks of ancient tools, overlaid by lichens, yellow or green, but all emanating silence.

"What fascinates me," Clara remarked carefully, after a while, "is how separate each stone is from the others, and yet how connected. Take one away and the circle would still exist, and yet you'd feel the space. It's like a marriage, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?" asked Ellie, suddenly alert to danger; but not knowing what.

"If you live with someone long enough you grow like that. You're part of a pattern; practically you don't exist without it. And yet you're separate."

"Is that how you feel about Edmund?" Ellie asked, as they started making their way across squelching grass to the gate which led down onto the road.

"Isn't that how you feel about Peter?"

"That he's part of my pattern. That I make up a pattern with him?" Ellie thought for a minute and then rebelled.

"No," she said violently. "No. No. No." She pulled the wooden gate to behind her with unnecessary force, and jumped down onto the road rather than negotiating the steps.

"Well, it's how I feel," Clara said. "I'm sorry, Ellie." She looked very serious, gazing meaningfully at Ellie, her eyes screwed up against a strengthening of the light, her hand on Ellie's arm.

"Why should you apologise, Clara? What are you trying to say?"

"What should I be trying to say?" Clara asked, still gazing. Ellie felt cold and helpless; it seemed pointless to protest. She might feel as though Clara was hammering away at the wedge she was driving between them, but if she pointed that out, Clara

would likely look at her wide-eyed, and say, "What are you talking about, Ellie? Why do you make such a drama of things? Why do you bring everything back to yourself? I was talking about me and *Edmund*."

And perhaps she was just talking about herself and Edmund. She shrugged and turned away, and heard Clara give a deep sigh behind her as if a difficult moment had somehow been surmounted. So then they walked up the hill, along a farm track, passing two discarded farm vehicles with rusty but dangerous-looking prongs, standing alongside a field whose brown and chalky stripes reached up to a clump of beech trees on a high horizon.

Clara and Ellie negotiated the mud, giving each other amused but distant glances, and sometimes helping hands. There were fat buds, they saw, along every branch and hedgerow.

"Oh how tactless they are, how shameless. Sometimes I can't bear the prospect of spring," moaned Clara. She and Ellie looked at each other for the first time that day with total understanding, and so were able to walk home arm in arm, like old times, thought Ellie, comforted by it on the one hand and feeling its absolute irrelevance on the other. However, she would bide her time. She felt calmer for the air and exercise and the slow breakout of the sun, and it was such a relief after the turmoil of the morning, that she did not want to disturb things yet.

They had a peaceful enough evening. That night Ellie was lying awake in her narrow bed, when Clara in her nightdress climbed in beside her, and lay for what seemed a long while hugging her without a word. Ellie could not think of initiating love-making. She lay tense for a moment, but the emotion involved seemed more than she could cope with, especially when she felt Clara begin to tremble in her arms; they both trembled violently and stroked each other's hair—Ellie did not know what response she should make to that. And after a time, while she was still undecided, Clara got out and went away, leaving behind her beautiful scented animal smell. Beset by feeling, Ellie did not manage to fall asleep till four o'clock or so, her drowsiness shot by small but cruelly vivid images of herself and Clara at other and easier times.

There was a slight frost in the morning and bright sun. Ellie felt bleary and tired from lack of sleep, but, surprisingly, more cheerful than she had done yesterday. Clara on the other hand, seemed edgy; after the carefully controlled gentleness of the evening before she was inclined to snap. Ellie dropped a carton of orange juice on the kitchen floor, whereupon Clara said she was worse than Hannah then clapped her hand over her mouth with a crowing laugh.

"You sound like my mother," Ellie said.

"You said it, Ellie dear," returned Clara sharply.

They had decided on an expedition to a hill overlooking Pewsey Vale that Ellie used to know. Clara demanded the car keys and Ellie handed them over without demur, though in some surprise; Clara did not usually volunteer to drive, given an alternative.

"You know the way. You can direct me," Clara said.

The sun had continued bright at Avebury, the frost glittering, then fading. But below them when they came over the Marlborough Downs was fog. For a moment as they hung there above it, they saw it as a whole, like a cloud beneath and beyond them, without detectable limits. Clara shifted noisily into second gear and drove laboriously down hill towards it, her body tense and hunched to the wheel. In a moment the fog had engulfed them; there was no space or place or distance.

"Perhaps we should go back," Clara said.

"No, it's not far. We turn off and then pretty soon we're there. We can see far enough for that. Have you put your lights on?"

They left the car by the church as Ellie had intended; they could barely discern its walls; the tower had vanished entirely. When they set off walking it was pure faith—only Ellie's feet knew where they were going, eyes and even ears seemed useless. It was her feet led them down from the church path, onto a farm track, past a farm, a copse, then took them over the canal bridge. They could not see farm, copse or canal, and on the far side of the canal where the hill should have been was a blank wall of fog. Ellie had to trust the track underneath to tell her which way to go, and still followed it doubtfully; she had not been here since before Lucy was born.

"Are you sure you know where we're going?" asked Clara, apprehensively, clutching Ellie's arm.

"I think so. Yes I do." Ellie saw with relief that the track, rutted but grassy, was beginning to lead unmistakably uphill. In a little while it petered out altogether; they went through a wire fence and out onto short tough grass which climbed very steeply.

"Here we are, this is it," she said thankfully. Behind her Clara had stopped and was bending over something. "Look," she said, "at this time of year, actually a daisy."

Ellie looked at the solitary daisy; but it did not please her; rather she had an instant, passionate desire to crush it underfoot. At once she set off at a redoubled pace not looking to see if Clara was keeping up with her. Her apprehension was increasing every minute—maybe it was the fog—maybe—she found she was screwing herself up to all kinds of questions; what are we doing here? Why? When? How? The place, herself, Clara, everything, seemed at this moment massively beside the point; beside the point of what?

A few steps on and she could see the clump of trees at the top of the hill. It did not occur to her at once that she could see them because the fog was thinning; but it was so. A little further on still, the fog began to blow about in shreds and tatters, and the flat top of the hill when they reached it, panting—it hardly seemed far enough to have made them gasp—was more or less clear altogether. Here and there were hazy shafts of sun. A clump of beech trees so beaten by the wind they had taken on the shape of old pines filled one corner of this space, but between them and where Clara and Ellie had arrived reached an expanse of dead grass stalks bent at different angles, and linked by cobwebs hung with water drops on which the pallid sunshafts glittered where they could.

"It's like some illustration to the Ancient Mariner," murmured Clara.

"But where's the albatross?" asked Ellie with an indifferent shrug; because the desolation of the place, its sparse, uncomfortable beauty, brought her feelings to breaking point and as the wind shifted minutely once again she heard herself ask in rather a high voice, with a note of pleading she had not intended, "Why did you ask me here this weekend, Clara?"

Clara threw out impatient hands.

"What a dramatic way of putting it, Ellie. Why ever shouldn't I have asked you to come?"

Ellie raised her fists and clenched them and lowered them again. For a moment she almost believed what Clara said. She had to force her way on against a sense of being unreasonable; why was it Clara made her so afraid of being unreasonable, as if that of all vices was the worst? As it was, though she used the words she had intended, it was in a barely audible mutter, her chin thrust down into her old navy coat with the buttons hanging off.

"I've hardly seen you for weeks. I thought everything was over—so why this now? And you don't say anything. You just go on coolly as if . . ."

At this moment Ellie did not feel any love for Clara. She did not even hate Clara; who was staring meanwhile over her right shoulder and adjusting her gloves, pulling each finger tight, one after the other; testing them again when she had finished.

"Why do you have to make an issue of it, Ellie—I just imagined a pleasant weekend that's all . . ."

"It's not all," said Ellie, "and you bloody well know it isn't." She began to shout. "One moment we're lovers, then suddenly without warning you start to behave as if I don't exist, or at least as if I'm only some minor acquaintance, and I'm supposed to accept it all without question. And then you ask me here. What game are you playing, Clara?"

Clara came up to her, put her hands on Ellie's shoulders; as abruptly removed them, at the same time hissing into her mouth, "Because I wanted to, you silly little goose. And now I'm beginning to wish I hadn't. Now I know why . . ." More pleadingly she added, replacing her hands on Ellie's shoulders, "Don't you see there are times you make me feel you are eating me alive."

"Well that's your problem!" bellowed Ellie at the sky, screwing up her face against the tears that were beginning to fall.

"Don't be childish," Clara said, almost kindly. She took Ellie's arm and they began pacing across the grass. When they came to the first of the trees Clara leaned against it and seemed to be listening to the sighing of the wind in the branches above her head. Ellie, exhausted, suddenly bent down and touched the tree roots holding firmly to the earth with their crooked fingers.

Her shoulders shook, she could not help it; above her head she heard Clara say, "I don't know what to say, Ellie, I don't know how to deal with you when you're like this. I'm not used to this kind of thing."

"Well that's your problem too," Ellie muttered, but not loud enough for Clara to hear. Crouched at Clara's green wellington-clad feet, she was so rent by tears she did not know how to deal with herself; and when she looked up and out and beyond, where there should have been landscape—canal and field and wood—reaching far away—was only a grey mantle of fog, her eyes straining into nothing. At that moment, behind them, a crow got up. Its harsh cry might have emanated from either of them; both turned in time to catch the untidy spread of its wings and tail, its veering into the wind. When they turned back towards each other Ellie saw her feelings mirrored on Clara's face—for a moment they stared in mutual acknowledgement, and then, giving a cry of her own, Ellie broke away, running back down into the fog, away from Clara, away from the dogged trees and the frozen expanse of grass, down the hill, past where they had seen the daisy, round the barn, over the canal (will Clara find the track, she wondered, and did not think she cared if Clara did not) till she reached the car, having run almost half the way, and leaned against it, panting; only to remember that she could not take shelter in it, because Clara had the key.

Clara might have been crying too, when she appeared at last, her eyes were distinctly red. It did not seem significant. They drove through fog and out of it to find Avebury still sunny. People were wandering round the stone circle, and the pub car park was full of cars. To Ellie's surprise Clara said, "Go in will you, Ellie, I think I want a drink."

"How very unlike you, Clara," said Ellie, drily.

"Why should I always have to be like what I am?" asked Clara.

Clara had a small brandy; so, still aching and empty with weariness, feeling she must look like nothing on earth, did Ellie. They sat side by side, on a red plush seat, their glasses set on imitation oak veneer. Leaning back, her eyes closed, the warmth of the brandy seeping through her body, Ellie believed the worst was over; for all that not a question had been answered, she expected nothing more.

"Drink up," she heard Clara say. And then, "Ellie, there is something I ought to tell you, now."

"Tell me what?" She was only half-alerted, drowsy, opened her eyes unsuspecting to the gleam of glass and brass.

Clara was twisting a beer mat on the table; quietly, almost conversationally, she said, "Ellie, we're going away. We argued about it for a long time, but it's certain now. We're going to live in France—no, Ellie, don't say anything just let me finish—" but Ellie was too stunned to think of opening her mouth. "Edmund will come back fairly regularly, of course, to arrange casting and to see galleries and so forth, but I doubt if I shall. So we won't be seeing much more of each other, Ellie. This is it. That's all."

She paused then; looked at Ellie; she might have been expecting something, but Ellie, numb with astonishment, had nothing to say. All the same her eyes had again filled with tears. Forcing them wider open to stop the tears falling, she saw Clara so minutely that she looked like a strange person.

Clara went on, regardless, her voice hard and high, "Don't think, little egoist, that this has anything whatever to do with you. And don't think I feel guilty about you, why should I? You needn't fancy yourself as my albatross. It's a matter for us only; Edmund and me. We lead our lives as it suits us, and that's the end of it." She laughed at the last words, but the Edmund and me had been delivered like a slap in the face. The tears did now begin to slide down Ellie's face, even if the only coherent feeling she had, was something like relief.

"Don't cry, Ellie," hissed Clara, anxiously. "You can't make a fuss in *here*." (Which is presumably why she brought me in here to tell it, thought Ellie, cynically.) Clara was waving a hand at the barman in his V-necked cardigan. "Quickly, have another drink," she said, and Ellie accepted, wiping her tears determinedly away. Clara, seemingly relieved, was kind now, looking anxiously at Ellie, fondly touching her arm.

"So you asked me here to say goodbye, Clara?" Ellie said.

"Of course. I couldn't just ring you up and tell you."

"Why not?" Ellie asked. "What difference would it make?"

Clara made no reply.

It clouded over during the afternoon. Ellie and Clara got

through it somehow, circling each other warily, like evenly matched dogs from different packs. Towards evening, however, as light began to fade, the atmosphere eased. Apart from a certain caution and a slight lack of gaiety, there came a semblance of old times between them. Ellie was thinking; I mustn't forget that in spite of everything I do like Clara, and like being with her. We are and have been friends. And next time she caught Clara's eye she smiled at her, if self-consciously. Clara half-smiled back, removing a tendril of hair that had strayed into her eyes. Ellie had to repress a desire to replace the errant lock herself, and afterwards to bury her face in that glowing hair as she so often used to.

Clara's cheeks had grown rosy for some reason like a peasant child's. She looked pretty and vivacious; in fact altogether younger. But then not long ago she had, to Ellie's surprise, insisted on opening a bottle of red wine; maybe having broken her news she felt less need to be careful; even so the wine had eased her sooner than might have been expected. The atmosphere rapidly showed signs of much more gaiety and much less caution—but the wine getting to her now, Ellie did not think she cared.

Clara, laughing frequently, had taken to teasing her, slyly, but without malice. Though staying close to each other they did not touch; they rather made a point of not touching, even accidentally; yet both were obviously more and more aware every minute that passed of the other's physical presence, glancing sideways, surreptitiously, as if to gauge the distance between them. They had, to Ellie's surprise, finished the bottle of red wine. Clara, discovering it, hesitated, laughed and then without comment, opened the other bottle, of white; to drink with their dinner, she said. But they made an immediate start on it, if at a slightly more sober pace. After the mellowness of the red it tasted crisp and tart. Yet still—they were eating now—, Ellie felt her tension rise—the sounds and colours buzzing in her head seemed to bear no relation to the silence outside, to the gentleness of the room. She began to feel as if she could find no release for it; the wine did not ease her, merely made it worse.

"Why are you so restless, Ellie?" Clara asked, as Ellie shifted her chair for the umpteenth time and reached out to play with the remaining nuts in the bowl. "Is anything the matter?" Her

colour was now very high; she stared at Ellie, holding her eyes fast, the pupils of her own so dark it was hard to think that they were grey not black; in them was a near barbaric glint, at odds with the renewed formality of her voice.

"No. Should there be?" asked Ellie, in like tone. Making a massive effort, she stilled herself. But when Clara went out to the kitchen carrying dirty dishes on a tray, she could bear it no longer, got to her feet and roamed round the room again, stopped to poke the by now huge fire and twitch a curtain closer. On a painted chest by the window stood a portable cassette radio; it made her more than ever aware of the intolerable silence. To kill it she reached out her hand and switched it on.

"Must you?" asked Clara, coolly, standing in the doorway holding a coffee pot, as a fragment of Brahms, rich as fruitcake, rolled out into the room.

"Yes," said Ellie, defiantly. "Yes, I must."

But she did not want Brahms or any of the other tunes or voices she encountered, wheeling the dial from station to station—jazz, pop, Mozart, all seemed beside the point, alien as the voices speaking Dutch or Portuguese or Polish, or the sonorous English voice discoursing without passion on the music criticism of George Bernard Shaw. She was about, as restless as ever, to give up when she noticed a cassette inside the radio—there was no telling what it was. She tried it anyway; after the usual humming pause there erupted, volcanically, some bars of familiar rock, followed by an unequivocally earthy and familiar voice.

"I can't *get* no, satisfaction—"

"I can't get *no* satisfaction," she bellowed, in answer, and at once, shouting with laughter, began to dance. "The Rolling Stones, don't you see," she called—Clara's expression was one of bewilderment—she still stood in the doorway, holding the coffee—"Don't you see, it's perfect."

"Yes, I do see. And I can just recognise the Rolling Stones," Clara said. But her eyes never left Ellie gyrating this way and that.

"Come and dance, Clara," she begged—and slowly, almost as if tranced, Clara put down the pot on the hearth and began to move towards her; while Ellie's body, hips swinging, lasciviously, unashamedly, invited her.

"I can't *get* no satis*faction*," she was singing to herself, first under her breath, then at the top of her voice—"I CAN'T GET NO—" by now dangerously excited, not to say exalted, her heart in her mouth. Huge flames were taking over; she felt suddenly very drunk. Catching a flicker of her own reflection in the glass of the green landscape, she redoubled her frenzy—she was showing off, of course; having lost all stiffness and self-consciousness she knew she was dancing well; her flesh begged Clara the more uninhibitedly, "Come Clara, I love you, Clara, I want you, Clara."

And still Clara's eyes hung on her. And in Clara's slow movement towards her was visible the beginning of answering gyrations; very slow, undulant, hesitant, her face set, anything but excited.

"Ellie," she was saying, "Ellie."

"Come on Clara." The song had changed. Get Off My Cloud. "Get *on* my cloud, Clara."

And Clara was dancing now, but not with Ellie, wheeling and bending by herself in the middle of the room, partnering something inside her own head. Ellie, excluded, felt cold panic, followed by anger. "Dance with me, Clara. Dance with *me*."

Clara smiled at her vaguely, even sweetly, but continued to go her own way, at which Ellie seized her and for a bar or two swung her round, Clara reluctantly responding to the rhythm—but in a moment Ellie had let go—they almost flung each other away, with such force that Ellie found herself clutching the table and gasping. She went to move the sofa and the arm chairs to make more room, while Clara continued to dance alone, surprising Ellie by how graceful she was—such a generous body, such beautifully shaped calves, such delicately stepping feet—oh, she was wild again now, hot with longing and pain and excitement, though wheeling to a slower note.

"I used to love her—but it's *all* over now."

"No, no," her eyes begged Clara's. "Let it not be."

And "Yes, it must be," Clara's answered. "But not now Ellie, no, not yet," while Ellie's heart ached in fiery melancholy.

When the tempo slowed still more—"Little Red Rooster, too lazy to crow today"—she could bear it no longer, flung herself helplessly, inexorably, into Clara's arms, and they swayed

about the room together, left leg glued to right, and right to left, one of Ellie's hands entwined in Clara's hair, the other close about her waist, her face so buried in Clara's breast she could scarcely breathe and had to shift her cheek surreptitiously to stop its being dented by Clara's gold locket; all of her suffused meanwhile by the scent of wool and Clara.

"Little Red Rooster; too lazy to crow today . . ." How satisfactorily sad it was.

There was silence when the song was over; they had reached the end of the tape. While it hummed to its close they stood, still buried in each other, swaying a little, but otherwise very still.

"We don't want any more, do we, Ellie," Clara murmured into her hair; her tone, though, tender.

"Yes we do," Ellie insisted. Twisting free of Clara, she stood a moment, waiting for the click which meant that the reel had wound itself off. Clara, she saw, looked as dazed as she felt. They might both have woken from a spell.

"Then turn it down at least. Goodness knows what the neighbours are thinking."

"*No.*" Ellie said, "*Sod* the neighbours." Eye to eye they defied each other—Clara even leaned a hand down and lowered the volume switch. Ellie promptly turned it up, and, shrugging, Clara let it pass; her sly smile was patronising, Ellie thought, she's allowing me my childish whims, but who cares? She took the cassette out and turned it over and pressed the play switch. Again for a moment they waited for the music to start, which it did with a jangle of discords that set her heart racing all over again. In a moment she was wilder than ever—it was the only way to defeat the terror—how else could you endure it?

"*Have* you seen your mother, baby, standing in the shadows? *Have* you seen your mother, baby, standing in the shadows?"

She did not dance with or for Clara this time, she did not want to, the pause had, too effectively, divided them. She danced for and with herself—and with her demons that drugged and mocked and called her, and called Clara too, if only Clara would listen. She jumped and turned and shook all over, her hair flying about her face.

"You're drunk, Ellie, oh look at you, little teenybopper," mocked Clara. But Clara herself seemed drunk enough,

swaying hectically in her corner, one arm on a chair to support herself. She had taken off her cream sweater; danced in a rather pretty pink thermal vest which emphasized her breasts. Her laughter had a hint of the same hysteria that beat in Ellie.

Ellie was getting tired now; but it only made her the more frenzied and excited. "This will be the last time," they were singing, "I'm sorry I can't stay." But she intended to stay, why should she let go? On she danced as furiously as ever, though it took much more effort, she was gasping and sweating, all her limbs ached. Clara had given up already, she was draped across the sofa in an abandoned way which made Ellie advance on her and retreat, invitingly. But Clara, smiling, shook her head. It wasn't enough; nothing was enough. Ellie in her longing withdrew so far she collided with the table again. On sudden impulse she snatched from the blue and white bowl the withered tangerine. This time, when she moved towards Clara, swivelling her hips, she was also, very slowly and deliberately, skinning the tangerine, dropping the peel on the floor as she went.

It did not taste pleasant—but nor did any of it; the excitement was beginning to sour on her, to turn ancient and frantic. Presumably that was why things happened as they did; one minute she was sucking at the last pig of the tangerine, the next she had swallowed it, had seized the remaining nuts from the bowl and was pretending to juggle—even partly succeeding—flinging both walnuts and brazil nuts, into the air in the utmost and confident abandon. She had used to be able to juggle a bit, but had not tried it since she left school.

"Ellie, don't, you'll break something," Clara warned loudly.

"I want to break something," cried Ellie.

(Whoever had put the tape together had ended it as it had started with "I can't get no satisfaction." It sounded futile and faintly evil. Ellie sang along with it all the same, "I can't *get* no satis*fac*tion.")

"For God's sake, *stop* it, Ellie."

"*No*, Clara. *No*." And now Ellie started throwing the nuts at her, first a walnut then a brazil, then another walnut, then all the rest. She did not throw very hard—none of them went anywhere near Clara, though two, given more force but aimed well wide landed in the fire which made as if to spit them out, hissing

and crackling. The next one, the last, jumped from the sofa just by Clara's arm; Ellie had meant this time to hit Clara; possibly to hurt her.

"I hate you. Clara. I loathe you."

Clara had leaped to her feet; she stood with her arms wrapped across her pink-clad breasts. Ellie at the back of the room panted, and having no more nuts to throw, found her hand on one of the terracotta figurines; she must have had it in her mind to throw that too—yet something checked her madness, so quite how it did skid from her hand she never knew. It seemed, looked back on, impossible, and yet there it was, granted some life-force of its own, flying upwards and sideways, colliding the next moment with the white glass globe of the lamp over the table, which shivered instantly into many curved opalescent pieces, while the figure itself lay on the table among them, headless, a terracotta torso with skirts and jutting breasts.

"I can't *get* no . . . I can't *get* no . . ." Mick Jagger was bawling yet again—they must have taped him twice over—Clara glanced towards the radio angrily, but still her face grim, went on advancing on Ellie—what for? Why was she coming? Ellie standing among the ruins, appalled and briefly sobered did not know. Clara looked so efficient. Was she going to shake her? Inspect the damage? Start to clear it up? Clara raised her hand then—she's going to slap my face, thought Ellie; instantly raised her own hand to slap Clara back—in a surge of furious anger she wanted to slap Clara, anyway, as hard as she could.

I hate you Clara; how dare you abandon me . . . But instead, the next moment, Clara had seized her uplifted arm, and was dragging her away, back to the sofa, and all the time she was fumbling at Ellie's clothes and saying incoherent things, most of which seemed to be Ellie's name.

This time neither of them heard Mick Jagger cease to proclaim his lack of satisfaction; writhing, screaming, snarling, scratching at each other, licking, biting, they were both too busy in love and hate trying to reach some satisfaction of their own—in vain—Clara had wrenched off Ellie's jeans and knickers, but nothing she could do pleased Ellie any more; she was hot everywhere except there where Clara was working; now and then maybe she felt a small flicker and tensed herself to encourage it—yelling "*Now*, Clara, bite me, harder, *harder*,"

but nothing came of it, and in the end exhausted, even sore, she had to push Clara off and promptly rolled over from her, drained, aching and weeping.

"I can't come, Clara. I so want to; but I can't."

"You and Mick Jagger," said Clara pulling her back towards her, and licking away her tears with a mouth that tasted of Ellie.

"Me and Mick Jagger," said Ellie, and began miserably and weakly, to laugh. "What about you, Clara. Isn't it your turn?" she asked.

Clara shook her head. Lying back she looked as exhausted as Ellie felt, her face as white as earlier it had been rosy. A lock of hair lay across her brow, so damp that its redness had gone. Tenderly Ellie moved it back and stroked her forehead over and over; for a long while they lay against each other—Ellie's top half clothed and Clara's lower half, for Ellie had only succeeded in reaching Clara's breasts—pressing their faces together and drinking up each other's cooler, cleaner tears.

Afterwards, aching from head to foot, dragging themselves about like cripples, they set to clearing up; gathering walnuts and brazil nuts, tangerine peel, shards of fine white glass; dirty plates and cutlery and wine glasses; two empty bottles of wine. They threw away the fragments, shamefacedly, not looking at each other, cast the nuts into the fire, washed the dirty dishes and went to bed, having drunk a large glass of water each on Clara's insistence, against possible hangover; remembering as they set foot upon the stairs, the untouched pot of coffee still sitting on the hearth. "We'll have to have it reheated for breakfast. And serve us right," said Clara. When Ellie looked at the alarm clock in her room she found to her surprise it was only ten o'clock.

In a little while Clara came naked to her bed; and they lay quietly stroking each other's bodies, giggling now and then in the awed, slightly shamed way of children who have gone too far but are not entirely willing to regret it. Clara had assured Ellie they would be able to replace the globe; they might even be able to do it tomorrow. As for the figurine, it was a clean break, she thought Araldite would fix it; if not she knew a marvellous man who mended pottery and china, so that you wouldn't know it had been broken.

"But aren't you angry?" Ellie asked. "It shouldn't have happened like that. I don't know what got into me."

"Wine. Or one of your devils," suggested Clara. "Or one of mine. No, I'm not angry. Though what I will be tomorrow I don't know. I'm not going to pronounce on that."

"It wasn't quite virtuous," Ellie dared to tease her.

"No. But what is? Very little I think. And at least it was mostly enjoyable, in an appalling kind of way." She began to laugh again. "What must we have looked like—two near middle-aged women. Do you suppose, Ellie, we'd have been different if there'd been music like that for us when we were younger? Just think what we had to put up with. Don't you remember?"

"Oh God, don't I," said Ellie. "I used to listen to Radio Luxembourg under the bedclothes when I should have been asleep. Katzennenlenbogan by the sea—ee—ee—ee. And Eve Boswell pickin her bloody chicken. And"—here she began to sing—"Put another nickel *in*, in my nickelodeon."

Clara took up the tune, "All I want is *lov*ing you, and *mu*sic, music, music."

"Which just about neatly sums up this evening," said Ellie, snorting with laughter, while Clara hummed into her ear, "Sugar Bush I love you so," and nibbled at her cheek. They were both very wide-awake. Ellie wondered if she would ever feel like sleep.

"Of course eventually there was Elvis," she said.

"Not for me, sweetheart. He came too late for me. By then I was married to Edmund and learning to keep accounts. The height of excitement in my time I seem to remember was Johnny Ray and Cry. Do you remember that, or were you still too young?"

"Just about," said Ellie.

"And before that it was Buttons and Bows."

"And If I knew you were coming I'd've baked a cake, and Let him go, let him tarry"—Ellie recalled without pain these songs her mother sang, that they had used to bellow sometimes, hilariously, round their dining-room table.

A moment later she asked in an uprush of simple longing, "Clara, may I make love to you?"

"*Please*, Ellie."

"You taste of garlic, Clara."

"We *both* taste of garlic."

"Oh Clara, Clara." Just touching her now, Ellie was so overwhelmed by such feeling, it awed her; when she let her fingers slide inside Clara at last they seemed to enter some rare container, cushioned and slippery and lined with velvet and with silk; at each touch it gave a little more, and in she went, deeper, through layer on layer, on layer—there seemed no end to the marvellous space within; and all the while her other fingers worked and Clara sighed with pleasure, until Ellie could bear it no more, and upended herself, filling her mouth with that sour yet inimitable sweetness, as Clara groaned, writhed, and at last, shuddering and jerking against Ellie's lips, gave four deep moans and came.

Afterwards Ellie would not let Clara touch her. It seemed superfluous. Clara was murmuring over and over, "Oh Ellie, how I love you. Never, never forget that . . . Oh, Ellie, Ellie, Ellie . . ." while she sucked the taste of Clara from her fingers and wanted never to let go.

They fell asleep in each others arms at last, but the bed was so narrow they were too cramped to stay comfortable for long. Ellie, Clara's elbow in her stomach, Clara's knees jammed up behind her own, fell asleep asking herself, crossly, why they hadn't used the double bed, and woke not long after to find Clara crawling out from beside her.

"I hoped I wouldn't wake you," Clara said.

"But I'm glad you did. Wait a minute, Clara, let me look at you."

"Only if I'm allowed to look at you."

Clara pulled the covers back. They gazed and gazed, both alike bathed in moonlight, cold and silence. Clara, one hand on her hip, posed almost provocatively—quite chaste provocation, though, like a Victorian statue—her flesh looked smooth as marble—while Ellie for her part worshipped her; goddess worship, earth worship it seemed in its intensity—this was Avebury after all. Yet the moonlight, smooth as it would, bleaching out the red of Clara's pubic hair, could not quite obliterate the humanity of her flesh; the stretch marks on her hips; the sag of her belly from childbirth; the veins etched upon her thighs; all these Ellie clung to as much as to the perfections. How vast Clara's body looked; like a landscape to hide in.

But when she put out her hand at last—Clara had been

surveying her as intensely, both of them were by now beginning to shiver—Clara said, "Well, Ellie, have you looked enough? Am I allowed to put my nightdress on?" Saying which she replaced the blankets gently but firmly over Ellie. "Aren't you frozen?" she asked. "I am."

"Yes," Ellie said, continuing to cling greedily to the glimpses of flesh still vouchsafed her, as Clara shrugged her way into her viyella nightdress. In the end it was as if a light had gone out. She stood concealed by cloth whose colour too had been bleached out by the moon. And when she leaned down to kiss Ellie, her eyes gazing into Ellie's were also colourless; the moon's glint on them was stony, icy, deep.

"You look like the Snow Queen, Clara."

"So do you, Ellie; it's the moon."

"I don't feel like the Snow Queen," Ellie said.

"Don't you? Then you should learn to. Sometimes I think it's the only way to survive."

In another minute, Clara was gone; Ellie lay alone in her narrow bed, with a sense yet again, of having been shut out of paradise.

Next morning Clara did not refer to anything that had happened the night before. Around eleven o'clock she took the car and went off, reappearing to Ellie's astonishment with not only a tube of Araldite, but also a new globe for the lamp. Moreover it was the right size. She wouldn't tell Ellie how much she had paid for it—a lot, she suspected—but Clara would not let her make any contribution.

Towards evening they drove home. As soon as Ellie walked in at her front door Peter started complaining. "Neither Sam or Lucy would eat what I cooked. And Lucy spent most of her time at Emma's (Emma was Susie's daughter) and wouldn't come back, and I had to keep ringing her up, and Susie got annoyed and wanted to know why her house had to be the child centre of the district, and why couldn't they bloody well come round to us?"

It sounded, all of it, familiar. "And meanwhile, there you were, Ellie," went on Peter, "living it up with your luscious friend."

"Living it up? In Avebury?" But she distrusted her indigna-

tion, so probably did he, though he could not have known quite why she counterfeited it. "Anyway it won't happen again." She told him about Edmund and Clara going to live in France. Peter complained that would be worse, she'd be gadding off to France to see Clara. Ellie told him not.

Peter said, "She's got tired of you, has she? Oh, poor love. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Peter can hardly conceal his amazingly innocent delight; this jealousy I realise, enviously, is for him such a simple matter, though I don't mean to deny his pain. But I am now so tired and plunged in gloom, I don't know what I'm doing. Perhaps I'll feel better in the morning when I've had some sleep. Peter says I've no business to be so tired after a holiday; he has a point of course.

Oh Clara, Clara . . . It is quite clear that everything is over.

That was the final entry in Ellie's diary. She did not intend to give up writing it. Each day she thought I must catch up, but she never did and the days went on. The date of Clara's departure moved inexorably nearer, but was not yet definite. A general election was called, at last—Ellie considered offering her services at the local Labour Party headquarters as she had done in the previous elections, but the thought of the busyness she would find and the sense of commitment was more than she could endure. She could not work any longer—she lived in a stupor—she might have gone into fog that day and never come out. All landmarks were obscured. Each morning she eyed the children at the breakfast table as blankly as she had come over the years to look at Peter, and they grew increasingly silent and wary of her, even while growing daily more demanding. Lucy in particular.

One day—Ellie had been standing in the sitting-room gazing out into the garden in which new green plants were beginning to thrust their way upwards, whether she liked it or not—Lucy came and stood beside her, and after staring with her for a while, pressed her nose to the glass and asked in a muffled voice, "What do you suppose happened to that black woman, Mum?"

"What black woman?"

"You know, of course, the one in the shop."

Ellie, dragged back into the world, was appalled she should

have forgotten it so fast. All the same, her feelings then belonged to someone else.

"I don't know. How should I know, Lucy?"

"Would she have done something like that again?"

"Probably; she seemed in such a state—perhaps . . ." Ellie, wandering off into visions of madness and violence, kept them to herself.

"Won't the police or someone stop her?" Lucy was asking, tapping at the glass. "Look, there's Dimmy, stalking a bird."

"Maybe. But I should hope that people in the end would realise she was ill and needed a doctor rather than a policeman."

"She didn't *look* ill," said Lucy, doubtfully, as the bird flew away and the cat sat up and started washing itself, pretending lack of interest. Ellie, passionately, wished she was the cat.

"You can be sick in your head, Lucy," she managed, "as well as your body."

"How do you mean, sick in your head?"

"It means that you start getting confused and thinking strange thoughts, and seeing things that aren't there; imagining, maybe, that everyone wants to attack you; all kinds of things. Haven't you heard of people going mad?"

"Yes, of course," said Lucy, primly, writing her name where she had breathed upon the glass. "And can a doctor stop you being mad?"

"If you're lucky; sometimes, yes, they can."

"So mad people can get better in the end? Might she get better if someone helped her?"

"She might," Ellie said. But she felt hopeless. Lucy wiped out her name and went away. The cat too had vanished; Ellie was left with the empty lawn, the daffodil spears and the fat leaf buds on the lilac bush near the window. But when she turned her back, fearing more sight of them, it was only to be confronted by Sam, yelling, "Lucy ate my crisps, it's not *fair*," and by Lucy claiming, also at the top of her voice that they were her crisps in the first place. Ellie's only reply was to give them her purse and send them out to buy more crisps from the shop round the corner.

Next day she drew up a rigorous domestic programme. She would spring-clean the house from top to bottom, turn out the

kitchen cupboards, mend their clothes and the children's, design a new series of lino cuts. She started hoovering the stairs, but only halfway down gave up and went for a walk in the park instead, where as usual, from the gate to the first plantation, round the hawthorn trees, past the riding enclosure and back across the playing field, all she thought of was Clara; but in a dull, resigned way, not with the fire and storm of earlier times. She sighed at the pointlessness, and between field and park gate determined to go straight down to the party headquarters to work for the election.

Yet what difference was an election going to make? There had already been an apocalypse of sorts, and very anti-climatic; no dragons or earthquakes, no fiery angels, only empty shelves in the supermarkets, shortages of salt and sugar and lavatory paper, how could you make a drama out of that? It was true that without salt, nothing tasted of anything—but nothing did taste of anything these days. Oh you poor thing, she told herself, and gave up. At least such reflections had made her forget Clara for a moment. At this realisation she determined to go and see Clara. Clara had told her to drop in at any time, which was so unlike her, Ellie never had, till now. Maybe she wouldn't be welcome if she did. Well then, too bad. Ellie did not think she cared.

Driving over to Clara's she would not let herself grow nervous. All the same she drove faster than she should have done, convinced that if not, she was bound to miss her, and when she had to brake sharply to avoid a mongrel dog, found that afterwards she was trembling unduly. VOTE TURNER said a large blue poster, nailed to the nearest tree. A man in a suit gazed glumly back at her. The same poster was fixed to several trees in Clara's streets and to many windows too. But there were no posters on Clara's windows. Clara disclaimed all political allegiance; indeed she would probably not even vote, she would have left the country by the day of the election. Knocking on the door of her house Ellie could almost hear in her head Clara's voice pronouncing this, which was perhaps why it so startled her to find Edmund not Clara standing in front of her. Clara, he said, was out, and not due home for an hour or so.

"Oh well," lied Ellie. "Oh well, it doesn't matter, I was only passing." All the same she felt dismal.

"Come in," Edmund said, "unless you object to talking to me, Ellie." It was an order. He held the door open, and smiling meekly, she obeyed.

Apart from the evening they had left for Avebury, Ellie had not set eyes on Edmund for weeks, and she found him as disconcerting as ever. When he had shut the door he stood eyeing her, while she cast her eyes everywhere rather than look back. There were no pictures left on the walls, she saw. The hall table was piled with sundry objects, none of them familiar; screwdrivers, cork-screws, glass bowls, china ornaments. Packing cases stood in doorways, some already full.

"I can't wait for Clara, Edmund," she said nervously. "I really am in a hurry . . ."

"Not in too much of a hurry to have a cup of coffee with me, Ellie. Oh come on, Ellie, you'll offend me if you don't. Surely you would have stayed for coffee with Clara."

He sounded unctuous; like a preacher softening his congregation before blasting them with thunder and hellfire and damnation.

"Oh well," she agreed, uncomfortably, "a quick one."

"Come up to the studio first, for a minute. I'm working." Indeed he wore the apron that had tools in the pocket at the front; his sleeves rolled up, his bare arms were as powerful as a wrestler's, but very white, with strong blue veins on the whitest parts. She climbed the stairs, ahead of Edmund, propelled by his momentum, it seemed, rather than any of her own, though he did not touch her. In his studio she went straight to the window. The glass dusty, she first breathed then rubbed her sleeve across it in order to see more clearly the garden and the broken urn below. The glass felt as cold as Edmund's breath on her back felt hot, when he came behind and put his arms about her.

"Well, Ellie, we haven't met for a long time. Have you missed me?"

"No," she said, twisting about, but his arms only tightened; she found herself gazing into his eyes and mouth. "No, not especially." She tried to make a joke of it. "You've been casting, haven't you, Clara said."

"Yes, but it's finished now."

"Are you going to have an exhibition?" she continued,

desperately. In such close proximity it was hard to make small talk.

"Some time," Edmund said. "But tell me what *you* have been up to, Ellie. That's much more interesting," shifting meanwhile his hands to her waist, so that she could bend backwards a little but not much. He wore his half-spectacles; seeing her own startled eyes reflected in them below his steely grey ones, she heard herself saying, lightly, "Oh this and that. Domestic things, very boring."

He put his head forward then and began kissing her. She wanted to resist, but did not know how to.

"Sweet Ellie," he was murmuring in her ear, "sweet little Virgin Mary. Isn't this inevitable. Hasn't it always been?"

"No," she said. "*No.*" She could not believe her ears; he was playing a game, sending up the cliches, no, worse, sending up *her*; mocking her with idiot words, to show how lightly he regarded her. As a rival? Yes, of course.

"No?" he was asking now. "You don't? then why have you kept on twitching your sexy little ass at me?"

"Don't be so stupid," she said as coldly as she dared, but his voice was colder.

"Not stupid, Ellie. Not stupid at all." Suddenly he was laughing, "You do have a sexy ass, Ellie, I can't help that." He wanted her to laugh too, but she did not; she did not think he meant her to be flattered, and she was not flattered, except fleetingly. She was, instead, both indignant and alarmed; and beyond that at a total loss.

Edmund had started unbuckling the belt of her jeans. She watched in disbelief, not trying to stop him. She owed Edmund something she felt in a distorted way, but surely she did not owe him this? Or did she? In any case could it matter any longer what happened to her? She felt so weary, and so far away. She would not have put it past him to rape her if she refused, judging by the expression on his face. Well, that was his problem, and anyway beside the point. She knew now for certain she was not going to refuse him, seeing with sudden clarity that she would thereby put herself beyond the pale at last, just where she wanted to be. Not only would she have had her revenge on Clara, afterwards she could no longer know her, let alone want her; let alone need her. That was the end of it. What

if Clara came back now and discovered them? Ellie, after an initial twinge of terror found she did not care. She no longer seemed to care about anything at all; watching from her distant place, standing straight, her hands rigid by her side while Edmund turned his attention to his own belt—a tooled leather one, with a large brass buckle. He had had to take off his apron, hanging it carefully over the back of the chair. (The tools in the pocket made it sag; no wonder his embrace had been so lumpy and uncomfortable.) Behind him was the shelf laden with hands and feet—he did not seem to have begun to pack up in here. I could grab something, she thought, and knock him out with it; a marble foot—a brass hand—even that jointed wooden hand might do. But then what would I tell Clara? Oh how very very absurd.

But she was not going to knock him out. She was going to let him make love to her. And if Clara were to appear, well, it would serve *both* of them right, they had both of them earned it. I want her. I hate her. I want him. I hate him. At that moment, viciously, she unzipped her own jeans, before he could get at them. Edmund removed the scarf and jacket she was still wearing and hung them on the chair with his apron. When she, coldly, efficiently and not entirely without pleasure began to kiss him back, he clamped each of his legs to hers and walked her back into the centre of the room. He could not have seen where they were going—he did not seem to need to, stopping at last, alongside the shelf which held the hands and feet.

He lifted his mouth from Ellie's. "Now?" he said. "All right? Are you ready?"

She reached a small marble hand off the shelf and clutched it to her.

"Yes, now," she said coolly, "if that is what you want."

"It's what *you* want," he said. She could not be bothered to argue, merely waited, while Edmund leaving her sweater, vest and bra, pulled off her jeans like an efficient father undressing his child, but without the tenderness; she, for her part, his fellow-traveller, stepped out of them at the proper moment.

"Lie down," said Edmund, unzipping his jeans—as savage, as swift an opening as the slitting of a hen. His cock too, she saw was white, like his arms; she turned away, blushing, from so dispassionate an examination, and laid herself flat on the dusty

wooden floor, staring up at the iron brackets and supports which held up the shelf.

He lowered himself down on her, his legs pale as the rest of him, but a little hairier.

"Turn over," he was saying, and again she obeyed, lying, thereafter, her cheek against the wood, its vibrations in her ear, still clutching to her tightly the marble hand? "Was anyone ever fucked before holding a white marble hand," she wondered. "Your tiny hand is frozen, your tiny hand is frozen" repeated itself over and over in her head as she clutched it, much as a child clutches at its mother's hand while the doctor probes or injects.

In that way Edmund took her from behind, and she, half-responsive, half-numb, reflected dispassionately on the absurdity of the sexual act; how ridiculous they must look, both still half-clad, both still wearing their socks. She made no moans meanwhile to encourage his feverish activity; that would have been the ultimate betrayal of Clara—at which scrupling she wanted to laugh out loud, hysterically, almost did, instead shrieked, as Edmund jerked more furiously than ever, and came with a loud cry.

My tiny hand is frozen. She could even hear the tune now, somewhere, faintly, in the distance. Edmund lay on top of her breathing quietly but heavily, his weight pressing her into the grain of the wood; she, opening her eyes, observed a chair leg, table leg, the legs of plan chests and under them thick layers of dust in which nestled all kinds of odds and ends long since forgotten. Clara she thought. Clara might come now. And for the first time she was terrified, beginning to wriggle desperately, trying to get out from under Clara's husband. As if to confirm the danger, Edmund's voice said in her ear, "We'd better get up. Clara will be back soon."

There was little dust on him when he stood up, apart from his knees—Ellie had taken the brunt of it. She had to brush herself down thoroughly, before struggling with her jeans, while he stood wiping himself on a tissue he had taken from a box on his desk. Why can't he hurry? she was thinking. Why can't he hurry? But he did not hurry; she had the impression he slowed the matter deliberately, pausing for a moment as he took another tissue and handed it to her. Then he threw his own

away into the waste-paper basket among sheets of crumpled paper, pencil shavings and apple-cores. His face remained expressionless; implacable was the word that came to mind. He and Clara. That was what they had in common; they were both implacable—neither would ever forgive her now. So what had she been doing, caught between them?

"Well then, that's done," he observed, his eye still relentlessly upon her. "Now I know what it's like to fuck the Virgin."

There was not a hint of flirtation in it; there had not been a hint of flirtation at any time. This was not play but business, and *what* business. Not just his, but hers. At this moment, when it was all over, she grew hot with wretchedness and shame.

"You must stay and see Clara," he was saying.

He laid tools in a drawer while she cried out in panic, "No, no. I must go now. I can't see her. How can I face her?"

"Suit yourself, baby," he said, and started to hum of all things a hymn, as he went to and from his little sink bearing jars and brushes. "Who would true valour see, let him come hither . . ." He was washing his hands now; then he began rinsing the brushes, and the jars, clattering efficiently.

"I'm off," she said.

"No. You'll have coffee first. Come downstairs."

It was an order, the final one. For the last time she obeyed.

After the clutter of the studio it was not till she reached the kitchen that she realised how completely the rest of the house had been stripped. Once-laden shelves gaped empty; three mugs standing neatly in the middle of one shelf merely made it look the emptier. There were no curtains at the window and Clara's plants had gone, save for a sickly yucca plant and a vase of drooping tulips in the middle of the table. On the draining board was a pile of newspapers and an open bottle of bleach.

At first glance it all seemed to Ellie a tangible image of what she had just done to what was left of her and Clara's friendship, making her feel, obscurely, responsible for this too; she might with her own hands have cleared shelves, stripped cupboards and lifted decorative plates from the walls, leaving behind, in faded patches and dirty marks, a previously unsuspected shabbiness and need for refurbishment. Not even the friendly smell of Edmund's coffee could comfort her. She sipped it as quickly as

she could, but it was too hot still and in a moment, just as she had feared, she heard Clara's step in the hall. She started pulling her sweater down, obsessively, as though its riding-up might betray her guilt, then the door had opened and there was Clara herself, huge in the huge brown coat which enveloped her, her hair held back by an orange scarf.

"Oh Ellie. I thought I saw your car," she said, in a neutral tone.

"I was just passing, I came in on the off chance," Ellie lied again, feeling the blush mantle her from head to foot. Clara surely must notice something; she *wanted* Clara to notice something. But Clara scarcely looked at her, unwrapping herself, then settling down at the table beside Edmund.

"Well?" she asked, "Isn't there any coffee left for me?"

This final confrontation between herself and Clara remained hazy thereafter. Ellie could not remember precisely what either of them said—she hardly knew at the time, all words blotted out by what she did not say, yet never ceased wanting to scream out in alternate anger and remorse from the moment Clara walked in the door, her face blank, her eyes impenetrable, "I have just been fucking your husband."

"I HAVE JUST BEEN FUCKING YOUR HUSBAND."

It was as much as she could do to stay there, sitting in her chair, but stay she did, sipping her coffee and throwing occasional frantic glances out of the window at the garden where the urn now lay on its side, the grass growing up round it. The smell of bleach filled her nostrils. She felt suffocated, she could not breathe, taking air in apparently noisy gulps, while Edmund and Clara across the table discussed, obliviously, what was it? Electrical equipment? European voltages? From time to time they glanced at Ellie abstractedly and apologised for ignoring her, nodding their heads together like a pair of dolls.

"I've just been fucking Edmund. Yes, Edmund. Now will you take some notice of me, you bloody bitch?"

She thought her head must crack and the words come tumbling out. She thought they must be written across her face; but if so Clara could not read, and though Edmund might be able to, he was not saying so, for all his occasional calculating looks. Perhaps, she thought, he wanted her to shout it out.

But she did not; could not. In the silence that had fallen,

Clara's fingers were tapping at the table, and the sight and sound had Ellie mesmerised. She could not take her eyes off her golden wedding band, blurted out at last, baldly, the only question to which she did not have an answer: "What will you do with your cat?"

Simultaneously Clara asked, "Well, Ellie, how's your work going?"

Both of them broke off in confusion. "What did you say, Ellie?" asked Clara, politely.

Ellie mumbled again, with ill grace, "I wondered what you'd do about your cat." To escape Clara's eyes (stop patronising me Clara, I've just been fucking your bloody husband), she turned about to look at the cat door, only then noticing that a strip of wood had been nailed across it.

Edmund said, "We had him put down. It seemed best."

"I suppose it was," replied Ellie. She had tears in her eyes; for the cat?

"Well that's it." Edmund got to his feet, briskly, and surveyed, smiling, first Ellie and then Clara. "No peace for the wicked. Back to work. Well, Ellie, presumably this means goodbye." He walked round the table, and pausing beside her picked up her hand and put it formally, exaggeratedly, to his lips. "How cold it is. Your tiny hand, Ellie, is frozen," he said, while she in that instant had a sudden terrified vision of his sinking his teeth into her fingers, followed by an equal and furious desire to grab his hand and bite it in her turn. For a moment she almost thought she had—but the vision faded, and she saw after all that he had dropped her hand and was standing at the sink pouring bleach into a bowl.

Ellie did not look at Clara when he had gone. She dared not. She had nothing whatever to say to Clara; she and Edmund between them had seen to that. The words that ran in her head were not hot, did not scream, they lined up and displayed themselves coolly and clearly like pebbles lifted from an arctic waste.

"Clara, Edmund and I have just been fucking on his workroom floor."

"I was only passing," she lied once more, getting to her feet.

"Are you going so soon? I'm sorry I wasn't here. But I'm sure Edmund entertained you well."

"Yes," said Ellie flatly. "Yes, he did."

Clara had risen too. They stood on either side of the table, eyeing each other for an interminable moment. Ellie looked away first. It was only a whisper now, but enough.

"Clara, I have just been fucking your husband."

Clara sighed; shrugged. Ellie did not see but she could feel it. Clara dyes her eyelashes, she was thinking, they shouldn't be as dark as that; Clara has stretch marks on her belly; Clara is wearing a brown dress and she has frizzy red hair tied up in an orange scarf. I am never going to see Clara again.

"Don't look so sulky, Ellie dear," Clara said, almost tenderly.

Ellie turned the other way. Clara, I am not a child. Clara, I have just . . .

"Well, Ellie, if you are going, go. I have a lot to do."

"So have I," said Ellie, but she could not think what as she went out of the door of the once familiar and homely room into the hall denuded of all but junk and packing cases. Grown numb and ghostlike, she scarcely knew where she was or guessed whose footsteps came hurrying after, or whom she would see when she turned round to acknowledge the voice which said behind her, "Wait, Ellie, wait a minute."

From upstairs came Edmund's voice, singing once again.

"Hobgoblin nor foul fiend shall fright me never . . . I know that at the end . . ."

"*Ellie*," repeated Clara. She was holding in her hand the bunch of tulips from the table, wrapped roughly in a sheet of newspaper. Ellie stared at them bemusedly.

"Goodbye, Ellie," Clara said. "Take them with you. They'll last a day or two." Nervously she laid a hand on Ellie's arm. They stood on the steps of the house, already Ellie could not remember going out of the door. How could she kiss Clara now, she was wondering, turning her cheek strategically as she saw Clara advance her lips. At that moment the telephone rang.

"Damn," Clara said, "damn." She hovered indecisively as it rang and rang again. Edmund clearly was not going to answer it. Upstairs he went on singing.

"Ellie," said Clara. "*Ellie*." And again, "*Damn* the 'phone." Still Ellie, stony, made no move and at last Clara, throwing up her hands, wailed, "I must answer it, it might . . ." She turned,

stumbled, ran up the steps. "Wait for me Ellie," but Ellie did not wait. By the time she wished she had it was already too late, she was in her car driving down the street, her last glimpse of Clara her brown back disappearing up the steps—Clara's red hair, Clara's . . . VOTE TURNER the blue posters still said from tree and window. VOTE TURNER.

Back at home Ellie found that the waxy red petals of the tulips had all without exception fallen from their stems, leaving only the stamens standing. Thankfully, she threw them away, still wrapped in the newspaper, stained with their black pollen; its headline, which she saw and did not see—Clara had given her today's paper—declared that election or no election, the miners were still digging in their heels.

It did not concern her. She wished that she was dead.

From then on, she is lost.

What right have I to feel so wretched? she tells herself daily. I'm not starving; I've a roof over my head. I've a husband, children, friends, no one is liable to slaughter me in the streets or inside my front door, no one is going to drag me off to prison and torture, so how dare I feel like this? What do they call it—privileged despair? Yet it is despair I feel. The fact it's privileged pain makes it no less painful. So why should I feel guilty, enduring it? But I do.

She is conscious of growing ever more nervous. The world seems so threatening she feels much safer observing it indirectly, in glass, in a mirror. There is a large mirror in their sitting room; if she stands at a certain angle to it she can watch the street outside, without anyone in the street seeing her. On the other hand she avoids catching sight of her own face, except when taken by the contrary urge to explore it minutely, pressing her nose right up against the glass, pulling back the skin around her eyes till she can see the bloodshot whites disappearing into the sockets.

I am grotesque, she tells herself and laughs. Without her noticing it, the children have come in from school. Lucy stands behind Ellie and asks coolly, "What are you doing? Why are you making faces at yourself?"

Ellie is startled; faint with fear she has to put a hand on an

armchair to steady herself. She mouths at Lucy, at last reaches words.

"I was looking at my eyes," she says, "I thought I had something in them."

"Oh," answers Lucy and goes away again, followed by Sam who has stood and said nothing.

(Ellie's mother had screamed one day, over and over, "Why won't they let me die? Oh why won't they let me die?)

The election rescues Ellie for a day or two. On one of her better mornings, finding herself passing the party headquarters, she goes in on impulse and offers her services. Within five minutes she is sitting at a trestle table before a heap of envelopes and an electoral register, while the atmosphere of excitement, the overwhelming busyness, first enwrap then rouse her. The professional smiles thrown round by the almost certainly losing candidate include her, she feels. She goes home after an hour or two more cheerful and human than for weeks, and makes the children chips for their tea. Afterwards, in a fit of wildness, she leaps round the room reciting poetry, while they watch her in silence, Sam sucking a finger, Lucy her thumb—Lucy's thumb scarcely came out of her mouth these days.

Next day, eagerly, Ellie hastens once more to the party headquarters, but it is no good, the comings and goings no longer exhilarate, rather they oppress her. After a while she rises to her feet and says timidly, "I must go . . ." If not, she is thinking, I will start to scream. No one notices her much. Someone asks her if she is feeling all right, someone else thrusts another stack of envelopes and a sheet of electoral roll into her hand, and begs her to do them at home, if she can't stay. So she takes the papers and flees. The envelopes sit for three days till Peter undertakes them assisted by Lucy. Ellie addresses one or two, but that is as much as she can manage. Peter looks at her helplessly; he alternates these days between being concerned and infuriated; he starts shouting at her now.

"You brought these back for God's sake. Why don't you do some."

But it is not this which makes him angry.

"Hadn't you better go and see a doctor, Ellie?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "Really," she says, "I'm all right."

Because she feels she is all right, that is the worst of it, that what is happening to her, what she is becoming, seem entirely normal. There is no other world. There is no other Ellie. This is how Ellie is.

(Susie drops in one teatime, and stumps out almost at once, saying, "My god, Ellie, what's the matter with you? Did that woman steal your wits?" It did not seem significant in the least.)

There had been one terrible evening while Ellie's mother lay dying. It had been dark outside, as dark in the corners of the room, which was lit by a single spotlight over her mother's bed. As usual several of them were gathered. ("Your family's behaviour is positively Victorian," someone had told Ellie in an irritated voice. But she did not see how else they could have behaved; you did not leave someone alone to die.) Her father had come besides Ellie, also her brother and her sister, while her mother at the centre screamed in fear, like a child left alone in the dark.

"I'm so frightened; I don't want to die. I'm frightened." And then, still more appallingly, or so it seemed to Ellie, "I want my mother. I want my mother," struggling feebly meanwhile between her father's hands. There was no way he knew how to comfort her, that she would let herself be comforted by him.

Flinging herself back upon the pillow, she continued to scream in a high wail, more like a child than ever, "I'm frightened. I want my mother," until the large Jamaican sister hurried in, and cradling her head upon her motherly blue bosom, managed to quieten her.

At last it is election day. The opinion polls are inconclusive. No one knows what will happen. In the evening Peter and Ellie go to a party held by socialist friends. Very early on it seems that Labour might have a chance of getting in; but the results grow more and more inconclusive and the party turns gloomy and breaks up early. In the morning since no one has a majority Mr Heath is still refusing to resign. The inconclusiveness accords with everything else that Ellie feels these days. Where did apocalypse go, she wonders? Where did I go?

Perhaps waiting for the election has been the only thing that has held her together; after Mr Wilson forms his minority

government, she gives up entirely. She dreams of burning houses and flooded streets, of people coming to her door bearing shrouds in leather cases. Waking, day and night, she reverts to thinking about Clara. If only they hadn't met/had met here/there/hadn't done/said this/that/the other. She knows it is a waste of time but nothing else seems left.

Soon it is mother's day. It seems like the last straw. Ellie stays in bed and hides her head under the blanket. When Peter orders her to come downstairs, saying the children have presents for her, she bursts out crying. He watches her helplessly for a while, then says, "All right, all right, I'll tell them that you're ill."

Later, after lunch, Ellie does get herself downstairs. There is no sign of Peter and the children. The kitchen is meticulously tidy, and on the table, propped up against a jug stuffed with daffodils, are two mother's day cards, one each from Sam and Lucy, very carefully lettered. The sight breaks Ellie completely. At once she begins to weep. She sits at the kitchen table her head pillowed on her arms and weeps uncontrollably. When she tries she cannot stop. XXX, say the cards; love from Sam; lots of love from Lucy. To my favourite mother. But she is not a proper mother. So what is she then?

(From time to time, far off, a small voice castigates her for this display of self-pity. It only makes her cry the harder.)

In the end, at about four o'clock, she is lying on the sofa in the sitting-room, banging her head against the cushions and shouting "I hate her, I hate her!" But whom does she hate? Her mother? Clara? Herself?

"Why did you leave me?" she is screaming now. "Why, why, why? I hate you . . . why? How could you leave me?" All at once Peter is standing beside her. "Ellie, Ellie," he says, "This is getting beyond anything. Don't you think you ought to see a doctor?"

"No, no, no," she screams, "I hate her. Why did she have to die?"

Peter helps her upstairs to bed. By the end of the day there is nothing, she is an empty vessel. She falls asleep at last, does not wake until five o'clock the next morning. She gets out of bed very slowly and goes to the lavatory. Afterwards she stands looking out of the bedroom window. It is light already. A cat

walks along the wall below her. There are birds busy in the lilac and elder. None of them have anything to do with her. After a minute she wanders back towards the bed. By the chest of drawers she pauses. There is a little brown bottle sitting on top of it, her mogadon pills, which she does not take often because insomnia makes her feel less bad than they do. All the same she picks up the bottle, looks at it for a moment, then goes and sits down on the floor still holding it. Carefully she unscrews the lid; still more carefully she counts out twenty or so mogadon into her hand, and lays them on the carpet. For a while, arranging and rearranging them into different patterns, she sits and stares at them.

This is it, she thinks, the lands of the far and frozen north. It is warm—snow is warm before you freeze to death. I *am* freezing to death, slowly, from the feet upwards; from the head downwards. When the shores of ice meet up round my heart, I'll die, I suppose.

The pills are round, she thinks. Round white pills. I make figures with them; a two, a three. I break them up and make an eight—that's two circles, I only want one circle, so I make one circle. I stare into it; I step inside it; I am the circle. Nothing can get in or out.

The carpet I notice, under the circle, is green and deep. I jab my fingers in it. Now I am inside the carpet too, I wander among its fibres like an ant, and see strange things around me; my feet, for instance, they belong to another strange body, not to mine. The fingers aren't mine, either, the ones that shift the tablets over and over. I observe with amazement their sure movements. Who moves them? I do not. They go on moving regardless of anything I tell them. They are picking up the pills now, eyes are screaming, no, no, but the fingers do not listen, nor the mouth that opens, nor . . .

Peter, standing over Ellie, pulling his pyjama cord tight, said, sharply, "Whatever are you doing?" Then, still more sharply, "You're not trying to take those?" His hand came down. The pills were scattered. "In any case," he went on, "it wouldn't have done you any good. You can't kill yourself with those."

Was I trying to kill myself? she wondered. If so I made a mess

of it. Clara once said she would succeed if she ever tried. All the same what did it matter? She felt exhausted; pulled back from Peter's hands, lay on the floor, numb.

Peter took over now. On his insistence she went next day to see a doctor; heard anti-depressants prescribed, a psychotherapist recommended. It was all very unpleasant, but gradually, over the weeks that followed, she rejoined the human race. By the autumn things seemed to have returned to normal, inasmuch as there was such a thing as normality. (The Labour Government had gone back to the country and got themselves a majority of sorts.) Ellie saw quite a lot of Susie now and was beginning to produce some prints she approved of. She had also restarted her diary. The children no longer looked at her quite so warily. Peter had stopped treating her as if she was liable to break into pieces any minute. Sometimes the way the two of them bickered, nothing might ever have happened; except for this one thing—not a good omen, perhaps, for their marriage—that Ellie could or would not cook anything but the simplest things.

It was as if the whole of the past had been contained in those simple alchemical acts, the transforming of cold into hot and so forth, and whereas before she had been fascinated by such matters, now she wanted to have as little to do with them as possible; all but the most basic she left to Peter. She could not make love either—each time they tried she had found herself screaming. He said, wretchedly, "I'm not trying to hurt you." "I know," she replied. But after the second time, tacitly, they had left it. Which might have explained the enthusiasm with which he flung himself into concocting elaborate casseroles, or confecting tarts and flans, each one a miracle of order. Sam and Lucy would hang over the table while he worked, and point out any failure of symmetry. They had never used to watch Ellie cook.

So life went on. Though over the years Ellie's life changed completely, she did not see Clara again. They had exchanged the odd letter at first, but by now she had long ago ceased to

hear from her. She had news of Edmund, however, for as the years went by he became quite a public figure and was always appearing on radio or television, expressing inflammatory views. Clara never appeared with him. She might not have existed. But one day, about eight years after they'd said goodbye to each other, Ellie was walking down a street in St James' when she saw some drawings in the window of a gallery. Even from a distance they seemed familiar. They looked like Clara's work, she thought. And drawing nearer she saw that they were Clara's work, yet subtly different from any she had seen before. For though these drawings of shells and bones and branches were as tight and contained as ever, they seemed to belong to the world much more than they had used to, they did not just celebrate themselves. Plastered above them, so obvious she had missed it at first, was the name, CLARA EWART.

She bought a catalogue inside the gallery. Its photograph of Clara (taken, she saw, by Hannah Baker) made her look very severe. Her hair was shorter and she was definitely larger, statuesque even, Ellie thought. A brief curriculum vitae gave her date of birth, her diplomas from Art Schools, the places where she had had exhibitions—rather more than Ellie would have suspected. "Clara Ewart," it said, "is married to Edmund Baker the sculptor and lives in France."

Ellie herself had long ceased to be married to Peter, though it had taken a year or two after Clara went away before she recognised that their marriage was not viable any more and decided to leave him. She lived alone with her children, and had made a career for herself as an illustrator and printmaker. She was happy on the whole. About this time she awoke one morning to find, unaccountably, that she had forgiven her mother for turning into her child. In doing so she realised she had also forgiven Clara for leaving her, and her mother for dying.

Her mother's death had seemed an anticlimax in the end. For four days she had lain inert, sustained by tubes and drips, not stirring even at the sound of Ellie's father's voice. Expecting her breathing to stop, they did not believe it when it happened.

Ellie, looking out of the window, probably missed the precise moment. Her father holding her mother's wrist still searched distractedly for her pulse long after it had ceased.

Back to the mother breast
In another place—
Not for milk, not for rest,
But the embrace
Clean bone
Can give alone.

LAURA RIDING

Ellie is a conventional, middle-class suburban housewife, with a happy if less than scintillating marriage and two attractive children.

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